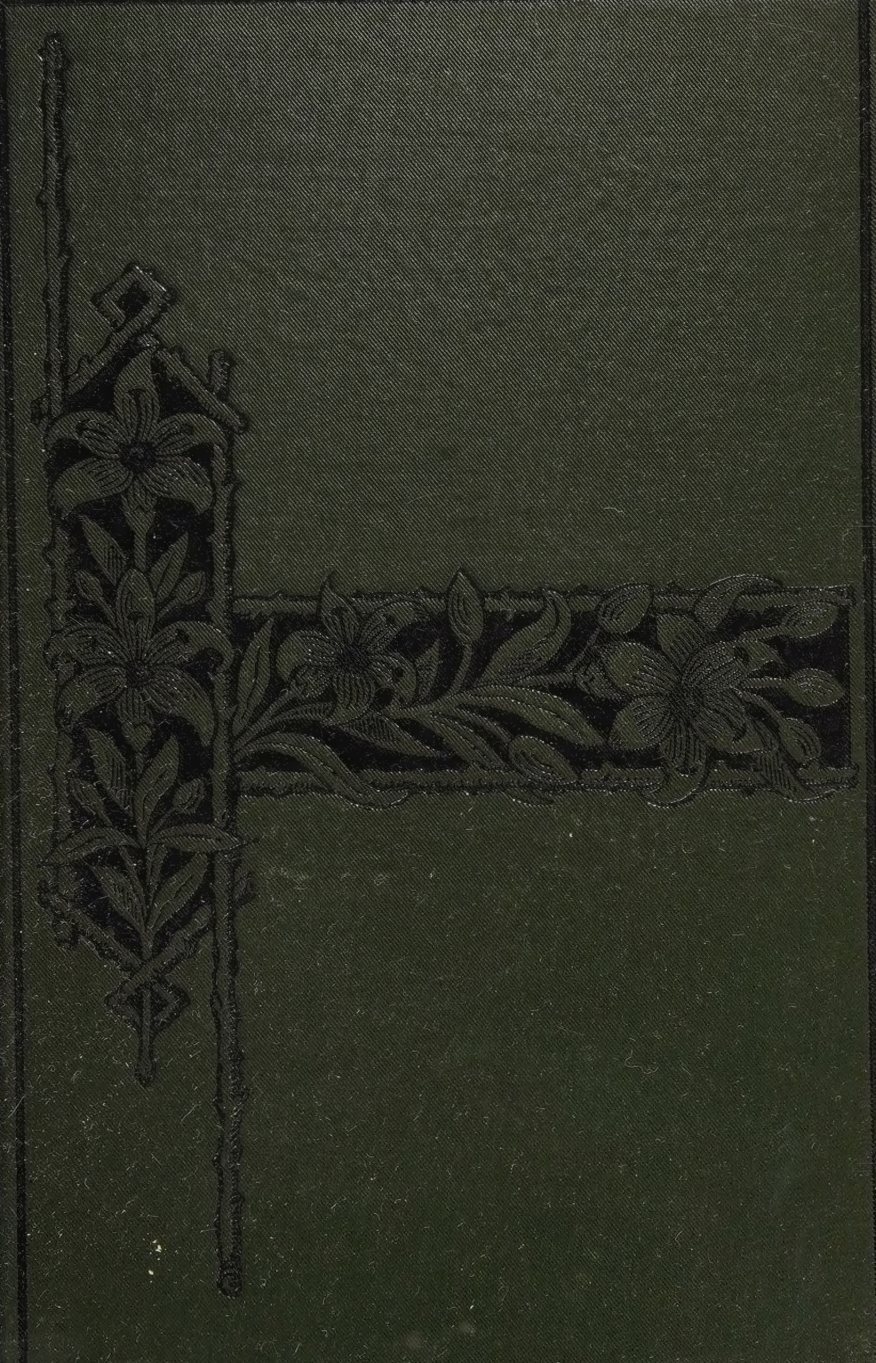

HER FRIEND LAURENCE.

A Novel.

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES.
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HER FRIEND LAURENCE.

CHAPTER I.

FROM AMERICA.

The interruption was so unexpected, Violet's thoughts so engrossed by Aylmer's words and her own efforts to keep the conversation upon the safe ground of banal compliment, that for a second Antonio's announcement only caused her a vague sensation of wonder, and she repeated the name in a low tone, almost as if trying to recollect what connection her mind had therewith:

'Miss Danvers!'

'From America,' added Antonio, his varied experience enabling him to take in the position at once. He felt as guilty as though he had committed a wilful sin—more so, perhaps,

for in Antonio's peculiar creed a stupidity was less pardonable than a crime, and he retreated sorely crestfallen, thinking, 'I deserve to be thrown downstairs! I ought to have remembered, though it is an at-home day, there are visitors and visitors, and not have intruded so suddenly when mademoiselle was alone with *him!*'

Miss Cameron and Aylmer had risen simultaneously; she got her wits back in a flash (at the same time becoming aware of a very odd expression in Aylmer's eyes), and saw the new-comer hesitating near the door. A young girl dressed in deep mourning, with a heavy crape veil, which might have befitted a widow, falling over her face, so that she was obliged to push it back, and she did so in an annoyed fashion. A pretty girl—prettier than ever in her embarrassment, wherewith mingled an attempt at self-assertion which might end in anger or cause her to run away in a fright if she were not received in a fashion to assure her that her visit was welcome. But though all this showed so plainly in countenance and attitude, she appeared neither bold nor disagreeably missish; somehow she gave the effect of a child playing at being a woman.

Violet hurried forward, and the little visitor cried:

'Oh, I have come to see my cousin, Miss Cameron, if you will please tell her! I am Mary Danvers—if you don't believe it you can ask Mr. Aylmer! He can say who I am if he chooses, and not some pretender, though he acts as if he didn't remember me! And—and—my cousin asked me to come!'

She looked inexpressibly tired; a burst of tears was evidently imminent, in spite of her determination.

Violet reached her side, embraced her cordially, and placed her in the nearest chair, saying rapidly:

'My dear child, I am delighted to see you! You took me so by surprise that I couldn't think at all for a second. I am so very, very glad you have got here!'

'Oh, thank you,' returned the other, in a hurried way, rather shrinking from Violet's caress. 'If you will please tell my cousin—Miss Cameron——'

'My dear, I am your cousin!' cried Violet, putting both arms about her. 'Welcome, a thousand times!'

Mary Danvers stared in astonishment—almost incredulity.

'Are you Violet?—are you really?' she exclaimed.

'Why, of course I am; for whom do you take me?' laughed Miss Cameron, pushing the heavy veil still farther back from the eager, wondering face. 'You are tired out——'

'Oh! but I needn't be such a goose!' broke in Mary. 'And to think of my not knowing you! I thought you would look el— I mean——' She stopped in confusion.

'You couldn't know me by instinct,' said Violet, caressing her. 'I am so sorry there was no one at the station to meet you; if you had sent me word——'

'Oh! weren't you expecting me?' interrupted Mary again. 'Didn't you receive the telegram?'

'No, indeed; but never mind—you are here!'

'Oh, she sent one from Paris—I wouldn't stop—and after all you did not receive it; and to fall in on you like this! Oh! I don't like it!' cried the visitor, and it was plain that it required a great effort to keep back a sob.

'And who came with you? Of course you did not make the journey alone?'

'I told you she sent a telegram,' rejoined Mary, in that injured little voice, and her chin, which she had with much difficulty just quieted, began to quiver anew. 'But maybe

she forgot—she did forget so ; and I ought to have attended to it myself : but I had such a dreadful headache. Oh dear, it is too bad to have taken you by surprise !'

'Not of the least consequence—don't think of it. You have come, and that is enough,' said Violet, very sorry for her, though unable to repress a feeling that so much confusion was misplaced, even while she appreciated the girl's efforts to overcome it. 'You are worn out by your journey, poor dear, and that makes you nervous.'

'Yes, that is it,' assented Mary, but Violet saw her blue eyes wander towards Aylmer, who stood waiting till the first salutations between the cousins were over before he came forward to renew his acquaintance with the younger.

'Here is some one you know,' said Violet. 'Come and speak to her, Mr. Aylmer ; the sight of a familiar face will do her good.'

Was there something peculiar in the manner of both ? Aylmer, at least, had recovered his usual demeanour by the time he reached the ladies. He held out his hand to the new-comer, saying :

'How do you do, Miss Danvers ? I am very happy to meet you again.'

'Thanks; you are very good,' returned Mary, primly. She let him take her hand, but quickly drew it away, and said, looking at Violet: 'I—I have not seen him since before poor papa died.'

Now she sobbed outright, but controlled herself in a moment.

Violet, anxious to change the current of her thoughts, began to speak of her journey. Aylmer joined in about its fatigues, and, as soon as an opportunity offered, added:

'I will take myself off, Miss Cameron, and give you and your cousin an opportunity to make acquaintance. I shall come to-morrow, if I may, to hear if she finds herself quite rested.'

'Yes, pray do. *Au revoir*,' said Violet, pleasantly; but she did not offer him her hand, and Aylmer noticed the omission.

'Good-morning, Miss Danvers,' he continued.

'Good-morning,' Mary answered, and gave him another of her odd glances, at once mutinous and reproachful—like a child who feels that it has suffered injustice, and does not quite know what form of defence it ought to assume; is a little afraid, too, that its self-assertion will be laughed at.

Aylmer went his way, divided between a natural masculine annoyance at the interruption of his interview with Miss Cameron and the reflections which the sight of George Danvers's daughter roused in his mind.

Violet saw her cousin glance after the retiring guest, and noticed that odd expression on her face; but in the poor child's present state, it was impossible to decide whether emotion or physical weariness unnerved her. Then, too, this arrival in the house of an unknown relative afforded reason for a certain excitement.

'And who was your *compagnon de voyage?*' she asked.

'Oh, please don't speak French!' cried Mary, almost irritably. 'It makes me homesick! I've studied it, and I can read well enough; but it doesn't sound a bit the same when people talk it. Oh, I don't mean to be impolite, you know!'

'It is just a silly habit of mixing languages that persons living on the Continent fall into,' said Violet, rather amused to hear how very apologetic her voice grew.

'I should not,' replied Mary; but she spoke so like a naughty, wilful child that the words did not sound rude.

'And who took care of you on the journey?' asked Violet.

'Why, Mrs. Forrester. Oh, you didn't get the telegram! It is that makes it so awkward, and me such a goose! I thought you would know all about it, and be expecting me.'

'But I am just as glad to see you, my dear—a pleasant surprise is always welcome,' said Violet, feeling ashamed because the girl's behaviour rendered a little effort at patience necessary. Mrs. Forrester? oh yes—you wrote me you were to sail with her. But I did not think you could have reached Liverpool yet.'

'She changed her mind just after I wrote, and we left a week before we intended,' said Mary. 'I got your despatch to say you would send to England to meet me—it came the day we sailed; but Mrs. Forrester was coming down to Florence, so I did not want to trouble you. I might have written from London,' she added, contritely; 'but we were so busy the few days we were there—sight-seeing all the time—and she said a telegram would do.'

'Of course, my dear—don't think about it. But where is Mrs. Forrester? why didn't

she come to the house so that I might thank her for taking care of you?'

'That was another thing that hurried us,' cried Mary. 'The day we left London she got a message from her sister in Rome, who was very ill; and I wouldn't let her lose any time: so I changed trains at Pistoja and she went on. I knew I could do well enough for that little journey, even if I didn't speak Italian, but——'

She had got on so easily in these last speeches that Violet thought the embarrassment all over, and now the child suddenly turned scarlet, her eyes grew so bright they looked angry, and then the tears gathered in them again, and a fresh sob broke her voice; but Mary struggled gallantly for self-control, and once more conquered.

'Lean back and rest a little longer; then we will go to your room, and you shall get your wraps off,' Violet said kindly.

'I am very comfortable, thanks,' answered the small personage, sitting upright as a dart, though too pretty and slight for the attitude to seem ungraceful.

'But you look so tired,' said Violet, for the sake of saying something.

'It doesn't rest me to loll in a chair,' re-

plied Mary, still busy subduing her freshly-returned excitement; 'I like a hard one best.' As she spoke she removed herself into a straight-backed mediæval affair, in which no creature of the present ease-loving generation had ever before been known to sit.

This bit of assertion seemed to do Mary good, but she was still longing to cry, Violet perceived, and the fact kept her from mentally styling her new inmate disagreeable; odd enough, to be sure, but a rather attractive oddity.

'Did you have a good passage—across the Atlantic, I mean? Were you sea-sick?' Violet asked.

'Mrs. Forrester was; I never suffer,' announced Mary, with the air of a veteran sailor. Perhaps Violet's face expressed a certain wonder as to where she gained her experience, for the girl added quickly, as if her veracity had been called in doubt, 'I went to Florida and back by sea when I was a little girl, with papa.'

Another sob here. Violet caught herself wondering how strange it seemed there should be any person to weep over George Danvers's loss! He had certainly made

plenty of people shed tears by his misdeeds; then she felt ashamed of such hard-hearted reflections in this poor girl's presence.

'You shall have some tea,' she said; 'that always rests one.' She rang the bell, and Antonio appeared in his customary speedy fashion. She gave her order, adding, 'Every thing is ready in Miss Danvers's rooms? Have her boxes been carried up?'

'Pardon, mademoiselle, none have come? I was about to ask mademoiselle if I should send——'

'Oh, my baggage—I forgot it!' interrupted Mary, springing out of her chair. The recollection of an odious adventure which she meant to keep to herself checked further speech. She had hurried through the station, and sprung precipitately into the nearest hack, only thinking of escape; and from that moment to this had not remembered those trunks which had weighed so heavily on her mind during the whole journey. And she could offer no explanation. Cousin Violet would believe her heedless and silly, and conceive a prejudice against her; but a recital of the facts would afford still stronger grounds for censure. Girls had no business to meet with adventures. Mary had no creed more

firmly fixed than this. Cousin Violet would be shocked—decide that she had been ill brought up—perhaps condemn her father therefor. A dread of blame falling upon the memory of her dead parent was always her first fear in these days. She had lived for months in a constant state of watchful defence, which would have gone far to render a girl less healthy in body and mind either hopelessly morbid or downright vixenish.

And the trunks might be lost—stolen; not only her wardrobe, but every precious relic she possessed, gone in a single fell swoop. Did ever such miseries befall another? Why, all the woes possible came upon her at once, big and little! As a crowning stroke to her discomfiture, she had said 'baggage,' and that was an Americanism—she had read so in an English book! And Cousin Violet, who had lived so long abroad, would think her uneducated as well as silly! In her troubled bewilderment she could pay no attention to some question of her cousin's, but caught herself muttering, 'Buggage!' a wild, impossible combination of the two words, which made her feel that her brain was positively softening.

But Violet had turned to the man again,

without noticing her insane ejaculation ; and, oh, she was speaking calmly about rooms and arrangements ; and the trunks might be stolen—had been already, no doubt ! Mary started forward with some confused idea of rushing off in search of her property—heard Violet exclaim :

'Don't stir, dear child !' and dropped back into her chair, and again her lips muttered that impossible word :

'Buggage !'

'What did you say, dear ?' Miss Cameron asked.

Mary only shook her head ; she was past speech ; so completely exhausted by fatigue and varying emotions that she did not care what became of the trunks, or herself, or anything in the world.

'Just give Antonio the ticket for your boxes,' Violet said ; and Mary managed to find her pocket-book and extract the paper, but, oh, she was sure she appeared hopelessly idiotic. And she could not explain ; and between vexation, weariness, and a shuddering disgust to recall her adventure, she turned positively sick and faint.

After Mary had drunk her tea, she felt somewhat restored ; yet all the while, as

Violet sat talking in a kindly cheerful fashion, an odd sensation that everything was unreal oppressed the newly-arrived visitor. She could hardly yet believe this the cousin whom she had pictured as faded and elderly, perhaps pretentious and affected, on the strength of having been a beauty—this lady, so youthful, so lovely, so like Mary's exalted ideas of what a princess or a poetess ought to be! She found it difficult to accept this brilliant creature as a relative in place of the ideal which she had formed and elaborated with the positiveness of her age—had shrunk from a little, too—and, while glad to discover her error, she indulged a certain sense of injury thereat. Mary was a model to girls in general for her readiness to admit that she had made a mistake or been in the wrong, but she had a trick of retaining that injured feeling under her penitence as a sop to her dignity.

'Now I will show you your rooms,' Violet said. 'Come this way, dear.'

For a space Mary quite forgot her troubles and annoyances in admiration of the charming nook which Violet had furnished with such care.

'My bedroom is next yours,' she ex-

plained, as they sat down in the boudoir, 'and Miss Bronson's apartments are next this room, so you will not feel solitary.'

Mary showed so much pleasure, and expressed her gratification so prettily, that Violet ventured to hope she had got quite at her ease, and that now they could begin to make acquaintance.

'My house is a rather gay one,' she said presently, *à propos* to some details about her daily life, 'but you shall not be worried at present.'

'Oh, I noticed you wore no mourning,' rejoined Mary, and stopped, confused and vexed at having spoken the words; yet the sense of injury came back.

'I did for a few weeks,' Violet replied quietly; 'as long as is customary, unless for one's immediate family. You must recollect that I had not seen your father for many years.'

'Yes—of course—I beg your pardon! Oh, I don't know what ails me; I say everything wrong; I never behaved so in my life—and you are so good to me!' cried Mary, her features working tremulously.

'You are tired, that is all,' Violet said. 'Now, my dear, I am going away, so that

you can lie down and rest before dinner; you will feel better then. Try to sleep, and wake up remembering that you are at home!'

She kissed the girl's forehead and went out of the room. Left to herself, Mary indulged in a hearty fit of crying, which did her good. She slept afterwards, and by the time she met her cousin and Miss Bronson, had recovered sufficient self-control to behave sensibly, though still embarrassed enough to be stiff and precise; a bearing which caused Violet serious doubts as to the probability of her proving a satisfactory companion, but which prepossessed Eliza at once in her favour, stiffness and dignity being synonymous terms in the spinster's mind.

CHAPTER II.

GIULIA'S GREEK.

'HAVE you seen Giulia's Greek?' asked Lady Harcourt, as she established herself in the cosiest corner of Nina Magnoletti's salon.

It was the little Russian's reception-day, and a knot of people, Violet Cameron among them, was gathered in the room. Her ladyship had just entered, and barely gave herself time to exchange salutations with her friends before she put her question.

'Has Giulia found a Greek?' demanded Nina.

'"When Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war,"' quoted Sabakine, with mock sententiousness.

'I knew you would get off that stale old quotation,' cried Lady Harcourt. 'Yes, Nina, she has; he only arrived yesterday! Oh, my dear, there is the most wonderful history attached——'

'Already?' broke in Sabakine.

'Be quiet, and let me tell my news—not a soul of you had heard! How delightful to be first in the field for once! And how do you suppose she came by him?'

'Advertised!'

'Made a compact with the devil!'

'Won him at cards!' This last suggestion was Sabakine's.

'No, no; nothing so hackneyed and common-place as either of those devices,' said Lady Harcourt.

'And she would have nothing to offer his satanic majesty, since she gave him her soul long since,' Sabakine added.

'Do tell me!' pleaded Nina. 'Nobody will ever guess.'

'Miss Cameron is the only one who does not try her powers,' said Lady Harcourt, 'Yankee though she be! Yes, I understand,' she continued, as Violet only smiled rather disdainfully in response. 'Not worth the trouble! My dear, you never will appreciate Giulia, in spite of all my efforts to make you.'

'Oh yes, I think I do,' returned Violet.

'At her value,' added Sabakine, 'which is above rubies! But don't drive us mad with

curiosity, Lady Harcourt! Who made the duchess a present of a Greek?'

'Her husband!'

A chorus of incredulity followed; Miss Cameron alone remained silent and indifferent.

'Her husband!' repeated Lady Harcourt, nodding her head impressively, and looking slowly around the circle till her eyes rested upon Violet. 'Miss Cameron is the only polite person among you,' she added; 'I shall tell my story for her special benefit.'

'So kind of you,' said Violet, laughing at her mischievous friend's efforts to tease her.

'One may be less doubting than Thomas, still there are limits to one's credulity,' said Nina.

'Lady Harcourt evidently thinks not,' observed Sabakine.

'Hush, you pair of schismatical Muscovites!' cried her ladyship. 'Yes, a gift of marital affection, and a very nice-looking one too: who could ever say a harsh word against the duke after this?'

'Are we to accept the duchess's unaided testimony as to the quarter from whence the *cadeau* arrives?' asked Sabakine.

'Not a bit of it; he comes under the

husband's seal. I saw the proofs,' said Lady Harcourt.

'Ah, do tell me!' urged Nina. 'It is cruel to play with all the better feelings of our natures in this fashion.'

'My dear, I have to work up gradually to my fine effects; one is not allowed such a marvel to relate every day! Well, then, I drove to Giulia's to carry——'

Her ladyship was interrupted by the entrance of Carlo and Aylmer.

'How do you do, Mr. Aylmer?' cried Nina. 'Oh, don't speak, either of you! Lady Harcourt had just begun to tell us something so interesting.'

'I can begin again.'

'Pray lose no more time! Giulia has got a Greek—her husband sent him—Lady Harcourt went to the house and found him. Now, now, please go on, my dear friend.'

'Oh, that story; have you only just heard *that?*' cried the provoking Carlo.

'I have long suspected you of being the most depraved of men, and now I am convinced!' retorted her ladyship. 'You only want to spoil my dramatic effects—you know nothing about it!'

'And what business have you here on my

reception morning, I should be glad to learn?' demanded Nina.

'Don't I know, my lady!' cried Carlo, holding up a letter. 'Nina mia, behold my excuse for this unseemly intrusion!'

'What is it—let me see!' pleaded Nina, hurrying forward and playfully trying to snatch the letter; but he held it out of her reach, while allowing her to look at the seal. 'The duke's crest—positively!'

'Certainly this is the age of miracles!' said Sabakine. 'Da Rimini makes his wife a present of a young Greek. Did you say he was young, Lady Harcourt?'

'And handsome, too!'

'And selects Carlo, of all people in the world, as his confidant,' pursued Sabakine, who was exasperating Aylmer by keeping the seat beside Miss Cameron.

'Oh, at this rate we shall never get at the facts!' cried Nina, sinking back in her chair. 'Lady Harcourt, if you have a heart in your bosom, go on with your story.'

'And I'll come in with the Greek chorus,' said Carlo.

'I drove to Giulia's to carry her some of my wonderful embrocation—her little girl had hurt her hand,' explained her ladyship.

'Ah well, the poor little thing stands a chance of being cured, since she can be treated for nothing,' Sabakine whispered audibly.

Nina menaced him with a paper-knife.

'And there sat Giulia and the Greek! I thought at first I must have been let in by accident; but no! Giulia received me with unbounded enthusiasm, and begged permission to present Giorgio Dimetri—a great friend of her husband's. He had just brought her a letter; the duke particularly requested her to do all in her power to make the signore's stay in Florence agreeable. How could she begin better than by bringing him to the notice of a person, etcetera, etcetera, as myself—spare my modesty! Then we talked; the fellow is well-mannered enough and certainly handsome. I should say a consummate rascal—and—well, I don't know how to explain what I mean. I got an idea that Giulia was afraid of him. I did positively!'

'Giulia afraid!' exclaimed Nina.

'It does sound absurd. However, he was exaggeratedly courteous and complimentary, and then he went away, and I thought how fortunate I was not a censorious person, else I should be wondering where she picked him up! But Giulia knows this is a wicked

world, and she treated me as if I were as wicked as Sabakine himself—brought her proofs. Actually showed me the duke's letter —so very prettily worded—joining praise of his wife and his friend so neatly, that I cried out in admiration.'

'And what did she say?' asked Sabakine.

'"Dear Alfredo is such a superior man!"' quoted Lady Harcourt, with so perfect an imitation of the duchess's manner and languid voice, that everybody laughed.

'And now for your part in the comedy, Carlo,' said Nina.

'What a changeable world this is!' cried Sabakine.

'To what is that *à propos*?' asked Nina.

'*À propos* to Carlo's turning out the duke's confidant instead of the duchess's,' returned Sabakine, coolly.

Everybody laughed again, Nina as heartily as the others; each week convinced her more thoroughly that Carlo's cure was too complete for any danger of a relapse. With all her arts, Giulia da Rimini could never again move him any more than if he had been made of stone instead of the sadly inflammable materials which entered into his composition.

'Read your letter, Carlino mio,' said she; and Carlo read aloud the gracefully-worded lines in which the duke recommended Signor Dimetri to the marchese's friendly offices.

'It really does all seem like a charade to which one hasn't the clue,' said Lady Harcourt. 'Carlo, had you written to Da Rimini that Giulia was rather lonely these days?'

'How could I, while Aylmer was here?' replied mischievous Carlo.

'"Ha! sits the wind in that quarter!"' exclaimed her ladyship; then she added meditatively: 'That supper is not paid for yet.'

She glanced from Nina to Violet. Besides themselves and Carlo, no one comprehended the allusion, but the trio recollected what she had said to Violet; and now, for the first time, it struck Miss Cameron that the countess sometimes went a little too far in her pleasantries; then, meeting her friendly, merry gaze, thought herself absurd to be piqued.

'Have I a supper to pay for, Lady Harcourt?' asked Aylmer, just because he must say something after Carlo's speech, which had turned all eyes, except Violet's, upon him.

'H'm!' said her ladyship. 'At all events, it was prophesied that——but never mind!

And did you receive the Greek with open arms, Carlo?'

'I should have done so, but unfortunately I was out when he called,' Carlo replied.

'I want to ask a favour of you, Carlino, but I suppose you have no time to spare,' said Sabakine, so soberly that, quick-witted as the marchese was, he thought the Russian in earnest.

'Of course,' he answered; 'always at your service. Why should you think I hadn't time?'

'I thought you would have to put the Greek up a little in his new *métier*—the retiring shopman always coaches the fellow that takes his place,' said Sabakine, as grave as a judge.

'Attend to your manners, Alexis,' said Carlo. 'Nobody cares about your morals, but——

'One moment,' interrupted Lady Harcourt. 'Get me some jeweller's cotton somebody, if Carlo is going to dissect Sabakine's mental anatomy. My ears are not hardened enough to endure that.'

As soon as there was a lull in the laughing chatter, Miss Cameron rose to take her leave.

'Going already, Violet!' expostulated Nina.

'I must. You know my cousin arrived yesterday. I promised to take her out to drive.'

'A cousin—a feminine one! You are less fortunate than Giulia,' said Lady Harcourt

'But my deserts are so much less, you must remember!'

'I hope Miss Danvers is well,' Aylmer said, as Violet's rising brought him within reach of her.

'Rather tired yet—a little shy and disconsolate, too, I am afraid.'

'She certainly cannot be so long in your house.'

'I hope not,' Violet replied.

'I was going to inquire after you all,' continued Aylmer, 'but I saw your carriage pass in the street. May I come to-morrow?'

'Of course. By the way, the professor has promised to dine with us *en famille*. Pray come too, if you are not better occupied.'

'As if that were possible! I shall be delighted!' returned he, with more energy than the occasion absolutely required; but fortunately the others were listening to some remark of Lady Harcourt's, and did not hear.

A rose that Violet wore in her corsage

dropped on the floor. Aylmer picked it up, and she held out her hand, saying :

'Thanks !'

He bent over her gloved fingers as if in leave-taking, holding back the flower and looking at her with such an eager entreaty to be allowed to keep it that permission or refusal seemed important, trifling as the matter was. So Violet simply appeared unconscious that she had lost the rose, and turned to exchange some last laughing words with Nina and the rest.

Carlo came forward and offered his arm to conduct her downstairs, and Aylmer thought his friend a monster for not leaving the pleasant duty to him. He longed to take his departure also, but his *culte* was so sacred that he never could bear doing the least thing which would render his attentions to Miss Cameron pointed in the eyes of their acquaintances. His precious secret must risk no contamination from premature exposure to those sharp-witted, careless-tongued people, who made a jest of every subject under heaven, from an idyl to a tragedy.

This time he had a little reward for his self-denial in listening to her praises. As the door closed behind Violet and Carlo, Lady

Harcourt exclaimed, with unusual earnestness :

'That charming creature always affects me like a breath of pure air.'

'I really believe she lives in some higher sphere, and just stoops to us occasionally,' said Sabakine ; then, as if ashamed of ever speaking seriously, he added with a laugh : 'To leave her is like going out of church without any of the bored sensation.'

'Oh, nobody could pose less for a saint,' rejoined Lady Harcourt. 'She is never prudish, never shocked ; yet somehow, bright and witty as she is, she gives me the feeling of a Una set in the midst of our—I mean your—wickedness.'

'Because she is the best, purest creature that ever lived !' cried Nina, enthusiastically.

'Isn't that her one fault ?' asked Sabakine. 'She is a thought cold—her atmosphere is a little too rarified.'

'She has a heart equal to her head, and that is saying a great deal,' responded Nina.

'Only no man has ever succeeded in waking it,' said Sabakine.

'I hope, for her sake, none ever will,' observed Lady Harcourt. 'It would be curious to watch her under such circum-

stances, but she is so earnest, so enthusiastic beneath her coating of ice, that the experiment would probably prove dangerous, considering what you men are.'

'You need not compliment her at our expense, eh, Aylmer?' pronounced Sabakine, with a mischievous glance.

'I agree with Lady Harcourt,' Laurence replied, so quietly that Nina indulged in a hasty wonder if it could be possible her idea in regard to the state of his feelings was without foundation.

As the marchese was helping Violet into her carriage, she said:

'There come Giulia da Rimini's yellow liveries down the street; you will have the happiness of handing her upstairs. No doubt she has brought her Greek to exhibit to Nina.'

Carlo was not sensitive, but he had no mind to endure the quizzical looks of his friends when he returned with Giulia and the new-comer, as he should have to do in case Violet's supposition proved correct; and he did not wish a *tête-à-téte* with her on the stairs if she came alone.

'Which way are you going?' he asked.

'Home,' she replied.

'Couldn't you drop me in the Piazza Maria Novella? I have an errand there,' he said.

'Oh yes; get in—if you choose to risk Mrs. Grundy's censure, supposing we are seen. Dear me, what a mortal terror you must have of Circe, since you are willing to sacrifice both our reputations in order to avoid her!'

'I thought you would admire my strength of mind,' returned Carlo, laughing, as he stepped into the carriage and gave the order to the footman.

'Or your prudence,' amended Violet.

'Do you really suppose I am obliged to cultivate that cowardly virtue where the Rimini is concerned?' said Carlo, for though exceedingly sensible in most respects, he could never keep his overweening vanity from crying out at the slightest possible prick.

'I should be sorry to have so poor an opinion of you,' she replied, and changed the conversation: jests on the subject were disagreeable to her.

Carlo was very attentive and tender to his wife in these days, often stopping away from the club and resisting the attractions of baccarat to remain with her. He always behaved

like this after one of his wanderings of fancy ; it was the certainty that the vagary would soon pass which kept Nina from becoming jealous enough for real unhappiness, and she possessed the wonderful wisdom and tact to receive the offender's return with a sweetness which few women would have been able to emulate. She never reproached him ; appeared neither sad nor sulky ; she simply ignored what had happened, and rendered herself as fascinating as if he had been a new victim to be immolated on her shrine.

By pursuing this line of conduct she kept a firm hold over the butterfly nature of her husband. He always came back—usually came speedily, too ; for, besides the masterly talent she displayed in her treatment of him, she seldom failed very soon to find means of putting his temporary goddess at a disadvantage. The woman for whom he conceived one of his violent, short-lived fancies, Nina was sure to pet and make much of ; seek her society, offer her entertainments, lay little pitfalls, and sit serenely by and watch the lady fall into them, and so disgust Carlo ; and she did it all so innocently that he never discovered the dispelling of his dream was Nina's work. He only decreed the other

woman an idiot; he beheld her commonplace, vapid, mere clay, unadorned by any poetical light, and marvelled that he could for an instant have imagined her anything else; and turned towards Nina, such a pleasing contrast, and adored her with all his might.

But into the contest with Madame da Rimini, Nina had carried more active sentiments, growing too jealous to behave with her customary tact. She had reached so high a pitch of exasperation at her impotency to counteract Circe's spells, that she might have risked ruin of her peace by open hostilities, had not Violet come so adroitly to her aid and ended Carlo's thraldom by the blow to his vanity.

'I never, never can repay you, Violetta mia!' Nina would say. 'You see how effectually he is cured—thanks to you. Oh, a man—was there ever anything so weak!' Adding this latter exclamation with the sort of pitying scorn one so often notices in women's words, and in their treatment of the opposite sex. Violet understood her state of mind, and only wondered that such commiserating contempt had no effect upon her tenderness for her husband. It seemed to Violet that she should never be able to

behave as Nina did, though she acknowledged the wisdom of such conduct. She could never condescend to similar warfare—to those little plots—those crafty efforts to recall the wandering masculine fancy; nor, when the infatuation passed, could she receive the delinquent with such complete ignoring of his misdeeds—such entire unconsciousness that he had strayed into forbidden paths.

Were the case her own, she should hate him; she was sure of that. Still, she could admit that such conduct showed real wisdom, though admitting it with a certain disdain which would speedily have chilled her friendly feelings for almost any other woman than Nina.

CHAPTER III.

AN UNWELCOME CONFIDENCE.

THERE was a little stir of curiosity in the room, carefully suppressed of course, as the duchess entered with the Greek, and attended by her withered, weedy *dame de compagnie*, whom she always remembered to produce when desirous of appearing intensely respectable.

'She must have picked him up somewhere, and forged the letters from the duke,' Sabakine said in a low voice to Lady Harcourt, while Giulia was presenting her cavalier to the hostess. 'She is always deep in deviltry when she drags out that unfortunate *âme damnée*.'

'Who always reminds me of a squirrel set to guard a boa-constrictor,' returned Lady Harcourt in the same undertone. 'But listen—isn't she delicious?'

'Such a shame Carlo is gone!' sighed

Sabakine, and the genuine disappointment in his tone, and Lady Harcourt's sympathetic glance in answer, were a proof that the absent one had been wise to beat a retreat.

'Cara marchesa,' the duchess was saying, 'let me present to you a dear friend of my husband's! I knew the surest way of enchanting Signor Dimetri with Florence would be to bring him at once to your house, dearest Nina.'

'Where you and your friends are so welcome, duchess; though the signore will soon learn how you overrate its attractions—unless he is always careful to come in your company,' returned the marchesa, bestowing a courteous smile on the stranger, though her intimates perfectly understood the reservation that last clause held, whatever might be the case with the Greek, who bowed and answered with sufficient readiness and ease.

'Is this your first visit to Florence, Signor Dimetri?' Nina asked.

'My first,' he replied; 'and I am already wondering how I could have deferred it so long.'

'I hope you left the duke quite well,' continued Nina; and again Sabakine and Lady Harcourt exchanged covert smiles, delighted

by the adroitness with which the little Russian signified to the duchess that she was no longer afraid of defying her.

'Still suffering from that tiresome sciatica, which forces him to keep within reach of his Paris doctor,' responded Dimetri.

'How could Shakespeare declare there was nothing in names,' said Sabakine, in a fresh aside to Lady Harcourt. 'Only think what a blessing for a worn-out debauchee like Rimini to find such a moral sounding title to cover his ailments; a saint might have sciatica, you know!'

'My husband gave Signor Dimetri a letter to Carlo,' said the duchess quickly, and she pronounced the words 'my husband' with a tender stateliness which caused Sabakine's face to express such ecstatic delight, that Lady Harcourt had much ado not to laugh. 'So you and he will have to share in my pleasurable duty of playing cicerone.'

'Carlo will appreciate the duke's compliment, dear Giulia,' said Nina, sweetly; 'but any efforts of his will seem so very poor beside yours! The marchese received your card, Signor Dimetri. Too bad, he is out, Giulia; Violet Cameron carried him off only a few minutes since.'

The duchess smiled and turned to speak to the assembled group, but she meant to make Nina introduce the Greek whether she would or not, and said:

'I presented the signore to Lady Harcourt at my house' (the Greek bowed, and her ladyship returned the salute), 'so he will be quite one of us without loss of time when you have named him to your masculine adorers.'

'And will speedily discover that I have no power over them when you are near,' said Nina, perfectly concealing her vexation at being forced by her antagonist to do what she had a moment before resolved she would not on any terms.

'Upon my word, Giulia's gigantic audacity deserves the overwhelming success it meets,' was Sabakine's comment in Lady Harcourt's ear, as he moved forward in obedience to the hostess's appeal:

'Prince Sabakine, the duchess desires me to present to you her husband's friend, Signor Dimetri.'

'Quick-witted little fairy! She has managed, after all, to put the onus on Giulia,' thought Lady Harcourt, regarding her with admiring eyes.

Sabakine was charmingly courteous, but

very grand seigneur, as he could be on occasion, and the Greek made his bows and speeches to him and the others, as the marchesa named them, with a composure which Lady Harcourt decided held an undefinable something which proved that his ease proceeded from effrontery, not thorough breeding.

A fresh instalment of Nina's exquisite Caravan tea was brought in for the newcomers, and her ladyship said :

'I cannot resist, though if I drink any more I shall be near a *crise de nerfs!* May I trouble you, Signor Dimetri?' she added to the Greek, who stood near the table on which the smoking samovar had been set.

She moved to give him a place on the sofa beside her, and conversed most amiably for some moments, while laughing talk went on, and the result of her ladyship's study was a meditation which ran in this wise :

'You are an adventurer, but your manners are good enough, and you certainly are very handsome. You are not a coward either—a score of devils stare out of your eyes—and you are perfectly incapable of fear, moral or physical. Giulia is certain to rush into one of her passions for you, you broad-shouldered,

passionate-eyed, cruel-mouthed creature! and you look capable of beating her if she offended you—and I am sure I hope you will! Now why did the duke send you to her? Have you got a hold over him? did he owe you money? No, you are not that sort of man. Did he project his soul into futurity, and gloat over the prospect of your one day murdering Giulia, and so freeing him from the pair of you? or what was his motive? Well, time will show—at all events the doubt gives something to look forward to. Perhaps now Giulia will relinquish her designs on Aylmer. Oh no, she won't!—she hopes to tease Violet Cameron. Can she? H'm! I am puzzled there. Ah, she has captured Aylmer, and taken him behind the flower-stand in the window. Now she peeps to see if the Greek notices—she *is* afraid of him! And he sees her, though he does appear so occupied with what he is saying to me—he sees her! He is one of those creatures that can look in every direction at once—a faculty left from that stage of development in which he was some sort of feline animal in a tropical jungle.'

The duchess, who had strayed away to examine the flowers, managed to catch the trimmings of her gown in a jardinière, and

summoned Aylmer, who stood nearest, by pointing out her mishap. While he was extricating the lace, she said in a voice inaudible to the others :

'Mr. Aylmer, will you do me a favour ?'

'I shall be most happy, duchess—you are sure of that !'

'Ah, I don't want compliments. I mean a real favour, though it is not a difficult one for you to grant.'

'You have only to tell me what it is,' he answered.

'I saw you were not prepossessed with him,' making a slight gesture of her finger towards the Greek.

'I assure you——'

'Oh, I saw ! I am very quick to notice even little things,' she continued rapidly. 'I want you to promise me to be friendly with him—do your best to make the rest so.'

'Any person whom you introduce, duchess, is certain of meeting with every attention,' he replied, rather evasively.

'Promise me—do promise !' she exclaimed, speaking scarcely above her breath, but with an earnestness which was reflected in her eyes.

'I can certainly promise to show every courtesy in my power,' he said.

'It is very important to me,' she continued. I will tell you why—I cannot here. Will you come to my house? I am going home. Please come. Ah! if you knew, I am sure you would not refuse! You at least have some generosity, some feeling! you are not like all those people there, who would not lift a finger to save friend or sister from a burning house!'

She spoke with a repressed passion and bitterness so evidently unfeigned that, distasteful as she was to him, he could not help a certain sensation of pity.

'Will you come?' she repeated. 'Will you do me the favour?'

'Please do not call so slight a thing a favour—of course I will come,' he answered.

'Oh, thanks—thanks!'

She moved away and sat down beside Nina. Lady Harcourt released the Greek, and the conversation became general. Out of sheer sympathy for any creature who appeared solitary and miserable, Aylmer several times drew Giulia's faded *dame de compagnie* into the talk; but, though her habitually anxious, startled face showed she appreciated his kindness, she seemed nervous at the very sound of her own voice. A lady born and bred—a sensitive woman with weak nerves and, originally,

principles and a sense of right and wrong—forced by the exigencies of fate to accept an anomalous position in Giulia da Rimini's house! It was no marvel that after living through five years of such an existence she looked, as Lady Harcourt expressed it, 'like a mouse caught in a trap—a mouse possessing gleams of a soul instead of a tail.'

'Mademoiselle de Roquefort, I think we must go if we mean to drive to the hospital,' said the duchess. 'Signor Dimetri, it would be cruel to drag you away.'

But that personage was too astute to prolong his visit.

'I have an appointment with the Brazilian consul,' he said, 'and must make my respectful adieus to the marchesa.'

A couple of the other men took their leave at the same moment.

As the duchess passed Aylmer, she shot a reminding glance at him; but, rapid as it was, that terrible Lady Harcourt caught it.

'She made an appointment as they stood by the jardinière,' thought her ladyship. 'Oh, Laurence Aylmer, is it possible that after raising your hopes to Violet Cameron, you can abase them "to batten on carrion"? But

you are only a man! Perhaps, after all, I do you injustice; time will show that too.'

As soon as the retiring guests were safe out of hearing, a chorus of voices arose.

'Was ever impudence like hers?' cried Nina.

'Her new man to be one of us immediately!' said Sabakine.

'He seems well enough,' said Nina; 'but what an evil mouth!'

'Very handsome,' pronounced Lady Harcourt, 'and I hope sufficiently wicked to have invented some new sin; one is so tired of the old vices.'

'And to be forced in on us like this,' said somebody else; 'not knowing anything about him, or where he came from!'

'He came straight from the duke,' said Lady Harcourt. 'I am sure it would be a comfort if one knew nothing about three-quarters of the people we meet in this blessed town.'

Fresh visitors were announced, and she rose to go.

'Be grateful, marchesa, that Da Rimini's present is at least presentable, since you have a share in him. *Au revoir.* I shall see you all at Potaski's to-night? Mr. Aylmer, be

good enough to aid my tottering steps with your arm—you look as if you were just going to take leave.'

'You pretend that because you want to carry him off,' said Nina, gaily.

'Only to the foot of the stairs—I have no sheep-dog to guard me, as dear Giulia had,' laughed her ladyship.

When they reached the anteroom, she said to Aylmer:

'I did not mean take leave of your senses, you know.'

'Have you seen any signs?' he asked.

'I see nothing ever—absolutely nothing!' she answered. 'That is what makes me the safest person in the world.'

'I shall remember your words when I have a secret to confide,' said he.

As she got into her carriage, she continued:

'Can I set you down anywhere? I don't pass the Palazzo Amaldi, but I do the Rimini.'

'Thanks; my lodgings are not in the direction of either,' he replied, laughing in spite of himself.

'I see nothing,' repeated she; 'not even a flower-stand when it is near enough for me to fall over it. Good-bye, Don Melancholy—

at least you always look like one, though I can't perceive that you are. You ought to wear a cavalier's dress, you know. Don't forget my evening—and——'

'I am not likely to, Lady Harcourt.'

'*And* just remember that sometimes elaborately private flower-stand performances are seen and watched—are meant to be, by the female wit which arranges them.'

She nodded, smiled, and drove away, thinking:

'Of what use would warnings be? If fate and Giulia mean to make him trouble, they will. Besides, I never meddle—that has been the ruling principle of my life: it is necessary to have one of some sort.'

And Aylmer felt confident that she knew where he was bound as well as if she had heard the duchess's words.

'If she were not the woman she is,' he thought, 'what a dangerous creature she would be, with those lynx-eyes and unfailing intuitions.'

He walked on, wishing heartily destiny had not thrown him in the duchess's way that morning, and thereby spared him the present interview. He was a man so singularly free from vanity it had never occurred to him to

suspect that Carlo's jests in regard to the lady's fancy possessed any foundation, and even had masculine weakness prompted him to think so, the duchess's efforts to attract his attention would have been as much thrown away as now, from the fact that Violet Cameron's image filled his heart and soul, to the utter exclusion of every other member of her sex.

But he would gladly have avoided the interview; he had no desire to become the duchess's confidant, to have any part whatever in her secrets. The woman was distasteful to him, had been from the moment he set eyes on her, and he vaguely mistrusted her—not on account of the aspersions cast upon her by her associates, for in Florence no two friends ever appeared to meet without having scandalous stories to relate of their mutual acquaintance, but because he felt her to be false and cruel—as utterly without principle as she was destitute of pity. Her very beauty was in a style antipathetic to him, and he had vexed Carlo sorely by declaring, when he first met her, that he preferred the plainness of the most faded blonde to the voluptuous charms of a big, black woman with fiery eyes like the duchess, which, even

when they wore their softest aspect, reminded him of a midday in the torrid zone.

However, there was no escape ; he must go to the Palazzo Rimini, and he tried to find a little sympathy for her by reflecting that her agitation and trouble had been real ; but the wish would come back that she had chosen her confidant elsewhere.

The duchess was at home, the porter told him—would he please to walk upstairs? The servant at the entrance of the great gloomy ante-chamber, where on a daïs still stood the two faded gilt chairs in which dukes and duchesses of bygone generations used to sit in state to receive their dependents, had evidently been given his orders. Aylmer was ushered without delay through several dingy, cheerless salons into a room somewhat more habitable, in which the duchess usually spent her mornings.

She was there now, standing by a window looking down into the narrow street where the sun never penetrated save for a brief space towards noon, and the lofty palace opposite seemed frowning at its neighbour with inimical glances.

She turned as Aylmer was announced—swept forward to meet him, her long black

velvet draperies trailing over the square of Turkey carpet spread like an oasis in the midst of the desert of cold pavement—her face appearing at its best in the sad, troubled expression which lay like a cloud upon it.

'Thank you very much for coming,' she said, in the sweetest tones of her indolent Southern voice, whose slight tremulousness was the more noticeable from the contrast to its customary slow, firm ring. She extended her hand, then seated herself on a couch which would hold two comfortably; but Aylmer took possession of an easy-chair by the table placed in front of the sofa. 'It was very kind of you,' she added.

'Pray do not use such an inapplicable word,' he pleaded.

'It is the right one,' she replied, shaking her graceful head. 'Do you know, even after begging you to come, I was almost ready to bid them refuse you admittance! But I could not have excused my seeming rudeness, and besides—no, it is stronger than I—I must speak to some one—I cannot endure my burthen in silence!'

He scrutinised her narrowly; she was not acting, he decided; but why, of all people, she should have selected him to reveal the strait in

which she found herself, remained a complete puzzle.

'I do not of course understand what you mean; at least, if any trouble has come upon you, signora, you can be sure of my profound sympathy,' he answered, and wondered if he looked as awkward as he felt, mentally congratulating himself that the speech sounded less stilted in Italian than it would have done in English.

'I was sure of that,' she said, 'else I should not have spoken to you as I did. She paused a moment; seemed trying to control herself, then suddenly exclaimed with infinite passion and pathos: 'Oh, Laurence Aylmer, I am the most wretched creature alive!'

Now if a man be ready to fall on his knees or open his arms in order to console a woman who makes a declaration of that nature, the hearing it no doubt possesses a keen interest; but Aylmer was not prepared to do anything of the sort, nor did he for an instant suppose the duchess desired either of such methods of consolation. Unfeignedly astonished by the outburst, he could think of nothing to say except:

'Oh, signora, signora!'

Luckily for him, face and voice were as expressive as can be bestowed upon a human being, and Lady Harcourt would have vowed that he resembled a cavalier or troubadour more than ever, as he leaned forward and fastened his melancholy gaze on the duchess.

'The most wretched creature alive!' she repeated, flinging up her hands in protest against earth and heaven. Then, with an effort at calmness, she added: 'I did not mean to behave like this! You will think I am acting—you northerner! Remember how difficult it is for us impulsive Italians to be calm and composed as your icy ladies are, no matter what comes.'

'Northerner though I am, be certain I can sympathise with suffering,' said Aylmer, and wished himself on the other side of the Alps.

The duchess's trouble was real; her fright real too (and she was not a woman easily frightened), but neither distress nor alarm impeded her invention or dulled her craft. When she entered Nina's salon and saw Aylmer, the idea flashed across her that even the dilemma in which she found herself might be turned to use where he was concerned. She could trust him with her secret;

she knew that whatever happened, he would never give a hint of his knowledge to any human being, and her confidence must unavoidably effect a closer intimacy than her arts had hitherto succeeded in bringing about. What she mentally termed his exaggerated chivalry would prevent his refusing friendly counsels to the woman who had trusted him, as often as she might recur to the subject, and intercourse established on that footing so easily glides into more tender relations! And now, though she would have preferred a free, expansive gush of sympathy in return for that dramatic enunciation of misery, it was a great step gained to have touched his generous impulse to the quick.

'I know you can,' she said; 'only that knowledge could have encouraged me to speak when we met to-day. Oh, do not think me bold and unfeminine because I transgress the laws which hedge us poor women in! Ah, if you could imagine the comfort it was when I saw you! I had felt so utterly alone. The trouble had fallen so suddenly! I could not think—could not tell how to act, and I said to myself, at least there was one human being to whom I could speak without fear!'

Oh, if she would come to an explanation of her woes and be done! He was sorry for her; he would help her if he could, hard as he thought it that she should have singled him out for the task; but he grew terribly impatient to get to the end.

'If there is anything I can do to serve you,' he said, 'only tell me—it shall be done at once.'

'Nobody can help me!' she cried.

Then why the deuce did she fall upon him? he reflected with a sudden irritation which chilled his pity.

'Nobody can help me, and I am powerless!' added the duchess.

'We are all apt to think so when trouble comes,' he answered. 'Surely your straits cannot be so hopeless. I am speaking in the dark; remember I do not know what has happened.'

'Let me try and get my poor wits back and behave rationally,' she faltered, pressing her hand to her head. 'That Greek—I want you to be friendly with him, to make the others.'

'I will show him every courtesy in my power, I promise you,' he replied, still busy in subduing his irritation.

'Yes, I must tell you why. I cannot throw myself on your generosity without good reasons. Mr. Aylmer, my husband sent him! Wait—I can make you understand more easily if I give you the letter.'

She opened a little casket that stood on the table, tossed about its contents in an agitated way, and finally placed the duke's epistle in his hands. Aylmer read the page; it held neither mystery nor menace that he could discover. On the contrary, it appeared a production which the most devoted husband might have written to his wife for the purpose of introducing a valued friend.

'There certainly is nothing here, duchess, which can account for your alarm,' he said, his impatience increasing.

'Ah, that is his craft,' she answered, with a bitter smile. 'I must tell you the whole, since I have begun! That man is sent as a spy, to watch me, to misrepresent, to twist everything I say or do into evidence which can be used to my hurt! I am impulsive to an extreme—I shall always be! I cannot weigh my words, calculate my conduct, and it is easy to blacken a woman who is frank, perhaps imprudent, because, conscious of her own rectitude, she believes her truth will be her shield.'

The duchess was about as impulsive as a *cobra di capello,* and her frankness of a kind that would have won Machiavelli's admiration, but one needed to know her as thoroughly as poor Mademoiselle de Roquefort did to discover this; therefore small blame to Aylmer that, in spite of his acuteness, his limited acquaintance led him to put faith in her opening assertions, whatever his opinion might be of her uprightness and rigid principles.

'A spy!' she repeated. 'Only look in his insolent, perfidious face; one can see at a glance that the creature was well chosen for his work!'

'Surely you must be mistaken, duchess!'

'No, no. Listen, Mr. Aylmer! Though my husband's conduct forces me to live apart from him, nobody can say I ever went about detailing my wrongs—my worst enemy could not—nor could he deny that they have been many.'

A fact, Aylmer knew. The duke was a man positively steeped in vice; almost as shameless in his open exposure thereof as the mediæval ancestors from whom he derived the base instincts which he had fostered with perverse assiduity.

'The time came when I could endure no longer,' she hurried on, 'but since his departure I have never opened my lips except to speak kindly of him! I have affected to consider our separation the necessity of circumstances. That the world comprehended the truth, I was aware; his outrages had been too public for that not to be the case. But I would have no pity. I held my peace —you know that society, cruel as it is, admits this.'

'I do,' he replied; 'and supposing your separation an amicable one, I am at a loss to imagine what motive the duke could have for such conduct as this.'

'His motive—it is easy to explain! He believed that I would live with him again—he used every inducement to make me. I could not; if it had been possible I would; but, oh, there are limits to a woman's endurance!' She stopped with a shudder, then after a moment continued more quietly: 'During the last few months he has ceased to urge me—ceased to hope it. Now he wants his revenge; oh, it is too dreadful! My life has been my safeguard, so he devises this plot. If he could manage to entrap me as he thinks, not only would he be relieved from

paying the greater portion of the income I have now, but he could take my child—my child; yes, give her to that horrible woman who is his companion in Paris—who helps him on when his man's invention fails.'

Aylmer uttered an ejaculation of wondering horror.

'It sounds incredible,' she continued, 'but it is the simple truth. I knew they were at work, but was at a loss to imagine what form their machinations would take until the very day of this man's arrival there came information which made it easy for me to understand his errand.'

'Yet you received him——'

'Good heavens, what could I do?'

'I should have turned him out of doors,' replied Aylmer, bluntly.

'And so added personal vindictiveness to the inducements which have set him to dog me like a bloodhound! No, no; a man might be so fearless—a woman cannot. I must temporise, act a part, odious and difficult as it is to my nature; I must let him visit me—be friendly. Ah, you blame me—I see it in your face.'

'It seems to my view that no good——'

'Remember my child—my innocent little

daughter!' she interrupted. 'She would be taken from me—given to that demon! Oh, I almost feel that if it were not for her I should cry out: "Do what you like—I can struggle no longer!" I would bow my head and creep away into obscurity, and let the world believe what he wishes—believe that I am what he tried so hard and so long to make me.'

She hid her face in her hands.

'I have said the worst now,' she went on in a choked voice. 'Oh, I know that it seems terrible for a woman to speak to any man as I am doing! but try to understand—think how suddenly this trouble has come! I have been strong and brave, but for the moment to-day I was at the end of my courage. I spoke to you before I realised what I was doing; after that—after such a request—I was bound to explain. You will not misjudge me as one of my own countrymen might—you will let me feel that I have one friend who pities—who would help me if it were possible?'

'That I certainly would,' he answered, though again he wished devoutly that she had chosen her confidant elsewhere, especially as she had no task to set him; he could aid

her in nothing beyond the negative assistance of being civil to the Greek, and he would have been that at her request without this tragic scene, as useless as it was painful.

'What can I do, what can I do?' she moaned.

Difficult to tell the lady that it behoved her to be exceedingly circumspect in her conduct, yet this counsel alone suggested itself to his mind, causing him to feel more uncomfortable than ever.

'Surely if this fellow has come on such an errand as you believe, every door would be closed against him, were it known; any man of your acquaintance would horsewhip him out of Florence with pleasure.'

'And ruin me!' she cried. 'No; I must meet craft with craft—I must learn how to do it—to feign, to dissimulate; oh, I had learned to be silent, but I never thought to stoop so low!'

'And you hope in this way to foil his intentions?'

'Yes; he may be deluded into betraying himself—that would render him utterly powerless. If not, then, seeing what my life is, he will discover that even his ingenuity cannot distort its open candour to serve his

wicked purpose, and so he may give up the game. Think of every side—am I not right?'

'Indeed, duchess, I am at a loss how to advise——'

'Ah, you blame me—most of all perhaps for speaking—for yielding to my consciousness that I could trust you!' she exclaimed.

'I can only feel honoured by it,' he said.

'I should have borne my burthen as I had hitherto—alone—if I had only had time to reflect—to get my courage back,' she continued. 'Do not condemn me; do not think me unwomanly! Oh, if you knew what a relief it is to speak, even though I feel ashamed in so doing! Oh, these past ten years—ten years! I was only eighteen when they married me to him; they took me from a convent, as ignorant of the world as a babe—no suffering, no degradation has been spared me! Ah, I think I am mad to talk like this! yet I cannot have you judge me harshly. I was wrong to say a word—very wrong; but having done so, I must make you comprehend how desperate this new danger has rendered me. Oh, I have self-respect enough left to be ashamed!'

'No, no!' he said eagerly. 'Pray believe

that you have my warmest, fullest sympathy —only I feel so terribly helpless.'

'Give me that—you can do nothing more. But sympathy is a great deal to a woman so completely alone as I!'

'Rest certain you have it, duchess.'

'Thanks—a thousand thanks!' she cried. 'And you will try to judge leniently?—try not to think me wrong in telling you the truth?'

'I have no need to try,' he answered truthfully; for the man does not live so destitute of vanity that he could very harshly condemn a woman because she offers him her confidence, however troublesome it may be to find himself the recipient of such trust, or however much he might censure her for bestowing it upon any other.

'Now I want you to go. Do not think me rude in sending you away so unceremoniously. You will not see me like this again! I shall endeavour to act for the best; but recollect we women cannot boldly attack our enemies like you men—we must outwit them. It is the penalty we pay for our weakness—for the unjust laws by which your sex has hemmed us in. Stale old complaints, I know, but terribly, terribly true!'

She rose and gave him her hand with a mournful smile. He had never seen her look so interesting as she did at this moment. Repressed misery, patience, regret at her own frankness, yet a sense of comfort in having spoken—all these feelings were expressed in her face, and she drooped slowly into one of her majestic attitudes, which would have inspired a sculptor.

Aylmer reiterated those protestations which the position actually forced upon him, and took his leave.

The duchess was tolerably satisfied with the results of the interview, though the gentleman certainly had not approached the verge of tenderness by so much as a word, but, keen-sighted as she might be, Giulia da Rimini had sufficient confidence in the power of her own charms to believe that no man could long resist them when they were fully put forth, and she naturally supposed Aylmer's very eloquent glances must mean something beyond mere commonplace commiseration. His failing to make the use of the situation which many men would have done, only became a proof that she had so thoroughly preserved her dignity that he feared the utterance of warmer sympathy might bring upon him

the reproach of repaying her trust by an insult.

It would have been difficult for most of her acquaintances to credit the statement, but every syllable she had uttered was the literal truth. Yet not only could she rejoice over the arrival of a crisis which afforded an opportunity to establish a bond between herself and Aylmer; but, in spite of her terror of the Greek, she felt no personal repulsion towards the villain—his exceeding beauty prevented it. So far from despising the baseness which could have induced him to undertake an errand like his, she considered his doing so a proof of ability, and she admired the unlimited faith in his own powers which he must possess to imagine that it would be possible for him to out-general her.

Ah, she should have a great deal upon her hands—full occupation—and excitement was always welcome. She had by no means given up the hope of reclaiming Carlo—she had the Greek to subdue, either by turning his head or finding some more profitable bargain to offer than the duke's; Laurence Aylmer to lead through the realm of friendship into a maze from whence escape would prove an impossibility; and Violet Cameron

to punish! Oh! nothing could be more imperative than that duty, and her hatred was increased by the certainty of her intended victim's caring for the heiress. She only wanted to be sure that Violet's feelings were interested, then subjugation of Aylmer would afford revenge upon the haughty, scornful creature.

And Laurence went his way, not in the least softened in his judgment of the duchess by his pity, though he gave her that freely, and no more reflected upon the possible false position into which the sentiment might force him than any other generous, impulsive man does where a woman is concerned.

CHAPTER IV.

DIOGENES'S ADVICE.

'So you and Miss Bronson have been doing a little sight-seeing, Mary,' Miss Cameron said the next evening, as her cousin entered the room where she sat awaiting the two guests whom she had invited to dine.

'We went to the Uffizi gallery,' Mary answered, 'and to San Marco.'

'And you were pleased?' Violet asked, making room for her to sit beside her on the sofa.

'Oh yes,' Mary replied, and said no more, and Violet wondered if her relative were as unenthusiastic as she seemed undemonstrative; but something in Mary's face — an eager, yet satisfied, expression which brightened it—warned Miss Cameron that she might be judging hastily. Perhaps the girl was capable of both enthusiasm and demon-

strativeness, but still felt too new and strange in her present surroundings to betray either.

'I am glad to find that Mary has a very proper appreciation of art,' said Eliza Bronson, who appeared just after Miss Danvers, from which remark Violet comprehended that Mary had listened patiently to the spinster's dissertation thereon. She saw a quickly repressed smile flit over her cousin's lips as Eliza spoke, and it struck her that perhaps, too, the little creature possessed a sense of humour, demure as she was. Violet hoped so; long experience of Miss Bronson had taught her that intimate companionship with a person who has none is frequently a trifle wearing. 'I think she quite enjoyed San Marco, also,' pursued Eliza; 'and I was able to give her some details in regard to Savonarola and Fra Angelico, and—you have not forgotten the other, Mary, my dear?'

'Fra Bartolommeo,' rejoined Mary, with the prompt obedience of a child repeating its lesson.

'Ah, I am glad you remember! I foresee that we shall acquire real benefit from our researches,' said Eliza, complacently. 'But, my dear, we must recollect that, gifted as

they were, those men were very benighted creatures after all—monks, only monks!'

The spinster uttered these words with a prolonged shiver, and again Violet saw the dimples deepen about Mary's mouth, but the girl caught her glance and tried to look serious, as if afraid of disapproval, and then seemed comforted when Violet laughed outright.

'You cannot deny it, Violet,' said Miss Bronson, severely.

'I don't mean to,' returned Violet, 'so please do not scold me for my weakness in regard to them. I am sure you had a pleasanter morning than I—forced to make a quantity of visits and go to a charity concert into the bargain. Oh, I hate charities!'

'Violet, Violet!' remonstrated Miss Bronson. 'Recollect that Mary is not yet acquainted with your rather—what shall I say?—exaggerated mode of speaking and——'

'Mary, my dear,' broke in Violet, 'be sure you don't let me contaminate you! Eliza, your example may serve to protect her.'

'Surely you know that was not what I meant to imply,' began the spinster in horrified tones, but Violet pretended not to hear.

'What pretty hair Mary has,' she said, secretly determining as she spoke that before long she would have it differently arranged: it looked too prim and stiff to suit her ideas. She really must lighten the child up somewhat—that severe black raiment seemed so unsuited to her. She rose, and went round behind the sofa, took some white roses out of a vase, and fastened two or three in Mary's tresses so deftly that the girl did not feel her touch; indeed her mind was occupied with Violet's remark:

'I am going to introduce one of my dearest friends to you, Mary, old Professor Schmidt, the best man in the world.'

'If he were not a—a sceptic!' cried Eliza, hesitating over the word, as if even the pronouncing it were a sin.

'He was in America once,' said Mary; 'I read some lectures he delivered—they were delightful.'

'I trust at least that none of his pernicious doctrines crept in,' said Eliza, with a deep sigh.

'I don't think so. They were given at a girls' school—one was on botany, another on astronomy,' Mary answered; and broke off to add, in a hesitating fashion, 'Oh, Cousin

Violet, you are all in white ! Is it a party ? I'd rather not—I——'

'No party at all, my dear,' rejoined Violet, as Mary paused. 'Just the professor and another gentleman whom—ah, I hear their voices in the anteroom.'

Antonio announced the German and Mr. Aylmer. Violet, standing with her hand on Mary's shoulder, felt her cousin start as the latter name was pronounced, and as she moved forward to greet her visitor, she glanced at Mary's face : it wore the same disturbed expression which had struck Violet when on the day of her arrival the girl caught sight of Laurence Aylmer as she entered.

'Fräulein,' said the professor, seizing both her hands in his, 'I am so hungry that I shall eat you if dinner is not served in two minutes. You look like a goddess !'

'Some heathens beat their gods—you want to devour yours,' returned Violet. 'It was very good of you to come, even if you do threaten to eat me, my dear old Diogenes.'

'Very good to myself,' said the professor. 'Ah, Miss Bronson, charmed to see you. You are looking unbelief of my having a deity of any sort.'

'Professor, professor !' said Eliza, in a

warning whisper that was perfectly audible to the others, and a glance towards Mary to emphasise her words. 'Let me entreat you to avoid certain subjects which distress me at all times, but which in the presence of youthful mind——'

'Ah, Miss Mary Danvers? I'll be so discreet that if you tell her I am a disciple of Calvin she'll believe you,' interrupted the professor, in an intentionally loud aside. 'Fräulein,' he added, unceremoniously breaking in on Aylmer's salutations to the hostess, 'leave that young man to the neglect he deserves, and present your musty, fusty old adorer to your cousin! My dear, I am very glad to welcome you; I shall call you my dear, though I spare my excellent Miss Bronson that—in public.'

'Professor!' cried Eliza, indignantly. 'Mary, he never dares at any time!'

'Mary—the very name for her! Oh, Miss Bronson, Miss Bronson, trust to my discretion. I will not betray our little secrets.'

'Secrets!' echoed she, in mingled distress and scorn. 'Excuse me, Professor Schmidt, but really your spirits carry you away.'

'My legs carried me on a tramp of ten miles to-day,' said he, 'and that wretched

Aylmer pretended an engagement just to avoid a little exercise ; he is hopeless, utterly hopeless, Fräulein ! I shall speak to our clergyman, Miss Bronson, about his excommunication.'

'I could wish that you had a clergyman,' said Eliza, with dignity.

The other three were laughing, but all the same Violet had leisure to notice that one of Mary's little flutters was apparent as she received Aylmer's greeting, even in the midst of her amusement at the skirmishing between Miss Bronson and her persecutor. But the wonder it excited in Miss Cameron's mind was on this occasion divided with another reflection. She had not before seen Mary really laugh, and between merriment, that slight confusion and vivid blush, she looked as pretty as an impersonation of Spring.

Antonio announced dinner, and the professor led the hostess into the dining-room, but gave his other arm to Mary, saying, in a whisper, which so perfectly imitated the audible aside wherein Eliza had a habit of indulging, that, with the exception of the worthy lady whom he presumed to mimic, his listeners were forced to laugh again :

'Don't intrude on them, Miss Mary ! I

have a horrible suspicion that my worshipped Miss Bronson is less faithful to me than she pretends, but I remain blind—blind. I will not verify my doubts, though they rack my heart, yes, to its furthest depths.'

Eliza affected not to hear the unseemly jest at her expense, and began asking Aylmer after his health, a ceremony she always went through as regularly as if he had been a confirmed invalid, instead of a person with every appearance of possessing perfect strength and vigour.

'You cannot be too cautious,' she added, in response to his assurance that he was never better.

'Indeed he cannot,' cried the professor; 'I hear every word, my Adeliza—every word!'

'After an injury like yours,' pursued Eliza, steadily ignoring the savant's impertinent interruption.

'He will meet with a worse if this continues,' said the professor, 'and so I warn him! Beware, Adeliza, beware!'

Eliza had to laugh at his comic absurdity, and the dinner commenced gaily enough. Presently Mary Danvers had a fresh disturbing prick; chancing to catch sight of herself in

a mirror which hung opposite, she perceived the flowers in her hair; it seemed to Mary they gave her quite a festal appearance, and she doubted if that could be right. Then came the thought, how very good of Violet to pay attention enough to her appearance to put them there. She had half feared her cousin too elegant and fine to think much about a young girl! Oh, she herself must be inclined to ingratitude! The bare idea that she could be guilty of a sin so despicable was dreadful indeed; and Violet happening to look towards her at the instant, marvelled anew what the earnest gaze of the girl's eyes could mean.

The dinner passed very pleasantly. After a time Violet led the conversation to graver subjects, and brought out the professor, as she had meant to do. He talked in his most interesting fashion, and even Eliza Bronson, as she listened, forgot all his shortcomings in admiration. He was one of those rare people who own the faculty of conversing upon scientific or abstruse subjects in a manner so clear that the most ordinary mind can comprehend. He had wandered over the four quarters of the globe, seeing with the eyes of a naturalist and a philosopher; he pos-

sessed a poetical appreciation of nature, and though he never talked for effect, never indulged in ornate periods, when he got fairly launched, his descriptions were so eloquent and vivid that it seemed positively to bring the scenes he depicted before his listeners.

It proved a blissful evening to Laurence Aylmer, though he talked less than usual; he felt in a mood when just to sit in the presence of the woman he loved and study her face unobserved was happiness.

He knew very well that any yielding to the impatience which at times he found so difficult to control might fatally injure his cause; but when alone with her, his eager heart fought for utterance, till often he could not master its emotions, and he recognised that it was fortunate on each occasion she had either successfully prevented speech, or that some interruption had occurred, as, for instance, on the day of Mary Danvers's arrival.

Ah, Mary Danvers! he saw that she was fluttered, almost ill at ease, in his society, and did not like to speculate upon the cause; he wished he could think it arose solely from her knowledge of his having met with pecuniary losses through her father, but once,

while he and George Danvers were friends, the gentlemen had dropped a hint that he should look favourably upon Aylmer's attentions to his daughter. Laurence rendered it unmistakably evident that no such idea had entered, or could enter, his mind; he regarded Mary as a mere child; had scarcely taken the trouble to become acquainted with her, though he visited the house frequently, for Danvers could make himself very agreeable when he desired. And not long after that conversation, Danvers's manner had changed a little; he devoted his powers to drawing Aylmer into those business schemes which proved so disastrous. When the losses came, Laurence could not help thinking that, as soon as the man discovered there remained no hope of providing for his child against the ruin which he knew must overtake him in a few months, by the marriage he had contemplated, he recklessly and ruthlessly employed his arts to obtain the money to fling after his own into the pit of speculation.

These losses had involved the discomforts of a sudden change from ample means to a comparatively limited income, but his future would be independent of them. On the death of a relative he must come into possession of

a large fortune bequeathed to her for life only, and she was now an elderly woman. Laurence was the last man in the world to calculate on such an event, but since his acquaintance with Violet Cameron the recollection that a few years would give him affluence became a pleasant thought; he had no necessity to hesitate or fret over the fact of her wealth, since before long he should fully equal her in that particular.

He was not given to talking of himself; even to the professor he had never mentioned that certainty as to his future—indeed, he regulated it in his own mind without such reference. He had come to Europe meaning to revisit places already familiar, study the countries he had not yet seen, then return to America and devote his energies to a political career. But meeting Violet entirely changed his projects of travel; he could not tear himself away from Florence, and in her eyes, as well as those of the professor, he had a reason for remaining. He was a facile, brilliant writer, well placed in the best reviews of England and America, and besides occupation of that sort, busy with a work upon certain periods in Florentine history, which, often as the whole chronicle has been written, it seemed

to him might be presented in a new aspect.

The professor, enthusiastic over his plan, and the most helpful assistant imaginable in researches among musty old tomes and parchments, felt confident that the result of Aylmer's labour must establish his reputation so thoroughly that the young man, convinced literature was his legitimate sphere, would relinquish the idea of rushing off into the dreary labyrinth of American politics.

To-night, as they were walking homeward together, the professor, roused out of a reverie which had afforded Laurence leisure to listen to the farewell words of Violet Cameron still ringing in his ears, seized Aylmer's arm, stopped directly under a lamp-post, and glowered at him.

'Aren't you a fool?' demanded the savant, in a mild, insinuating voice, as if offering some highly complimentary remark.

'I dare say I am,' returned Aylmer.

'And I dare to say so too,' said the professor, with a Jupiter-like nod and a tone of exceeding triumph. 'I have been watching you for weeks, and I *know* that you are.'

'Rather a waste of your valuable powers; doesn't speak much either for your perspicuity,

if it has taken you so long to arrive at such a self-evident fact,' retorted Aylmer, for once wishing the dogmatical old man a thousand leagues away.

'Don't you sneer in your fine gentleman dandified fashion, else the first time you fall into my hands again as patient, I'll—I'll poison you!' cried the professor. 'Yes, I've been watching you——'

'So you just said!'

'And you're a fool!'

'You told me that too; as I knew it already, there is no necessity for repeating it.'

'There is! The human animal is so dull that you must hammer at it with a fact before you can bring conviction to the mind in regard to the thing it knows perfectly well.'

'That sounds very fine and very German, but I don't think it means anything,' said Aylmer.

Then they both laughed, and walked on for some moments in silence.

'You don't want advice? I never saw the human being who did when he really stood in need of it,' quoth the professor, suddenly. 'Well, well! here we are at the Duomo Square; let us walk round the cathedral, and study the effect of the moonlight on the side

where they have been cleaning the walls—done with vitriol, they tell me, which will cause them to decay rapidly; but as the beautiful old edifice will last our time, we won't grumble at having it made more beautiful.'

They passed under the shadow of the vast pile, and stopped behind Giotto's tower, which rose airy and majestic—a crown of stars seeming to rest upon its summit. The moonlight fell full upon that part of the church—illuminating one doorway which had a narrow casement on either side. Every detail came out with wonderful distinctness—the figures in the window-niches, the Virgin behind her shrine above the portal—the whole a mass of such marvellous and intricate carving, that it looked like some gigantic ivory casket wrought with black and silver.

It was late—not a person in sight—not a common street sound to vex the air. Suddenly the Campanile bell—that sweetest-voiced singer in Europe—slowly chanted midnight in its soft, deep, velvety bass, ringing down from the tower's height with such superhuman melody that it seemed to Aylmer's dreamy fancy he must be catching strains from the very courts of heaven—

counted its orison, and was mute, leaving the echo of its sweetness on the listening air.

Presently they went along the Via Calzajoli to the Piazza Signoria, and paused before the Palazzo Vecchio with its lily-like tower (the only comparison, stern grey stone though its material be), watched the yellow glory gild Orcagna's Loggia, brighten the bronze Perseus, mantle Fedi's group—then, still in silence, wandered through the statue-lined colonnades of the Uffizi, and came out upon the Arno. At the right, the quaint, picturesque Ponte Vecchio shut in the view; away to the left, San Miniato blazed with lights; and beyond, the outlines of the distant mountains showed like cloud-castles in the transparent atmosphere.

'*Ach*, what a beautiful city, what a beautiful world!' the professor boomed forth. Then he took a long German pipe from the pocket of his ulster, lighted it as carefully and lovingly as if it had been some sacred censer, the kindling whereof was a religious rite, puffed a column of white smoke into the air, and descended from philosophical meditations to deliver the lecture which he had deceitfully allowed Aylmer to think was to be spared.

'Young man, I do not wear a petticoat

and I am not perhaps exactly what one might term a beauty, but I propose to render this interview useful to your benighted faculties, even if I cannot make it interesting.'

'Heaven help me!' groaned Laurence.

'Be silent, you!' commanded the professor, looking sternly out from a halo of smoke. 'You are in love with *her*—you would be an ass if you were not!' Aylmer made a quick, indignant gesture. 'Listen to the oracle,' pursued the savant; 'there is more behind! She is in love with you, though you did not know it, nor does she.'

Aylmer's rising irritation vanished. He could not have offered any confidence; coming from another man he would have regarded such words a gross impertinence, but he loved and honoured the professor so highly that he was content to learn that the sage had discovered his precious secret, and hear him plunge with brutal frankness into a discussion thereof.

'She is growing gradually in love with you,' amended the savant, slowly and emphatically. 'Don't contradict—don't deny!'

'I have no intention where I am concerned,' Aylmer replied, 'but in regard to—to her—your wisdom is at fault. After all, why

should she care for me—what man would be worthy——'

'Stuff!' broke in the professor. 'Nature never is guilty of that kind of blunder. No matter what the race or the sex of the animal she has in hand, she always makes a mate for it—a fitting one, too.'

'In this case, though, the word you employ——'

'Come, don't fight over words! If you are offended because I said animal, I'll substitute swan—nightingale! I can't go so far as seraph to content you, because I am making a statement of facts, and, therefore, no imaginary creature will serve for a comparison.'

'Confound your materialistic ideas!'

'I did not dispute the existence of seraphs, but as nobody ever saw one, touched one, why the race belongs to the domain of faith, that's all. Come, you put me out—seraph, if you insist upon it, though no account we have of the myth includes females.'

'What a provoking old wretch you are!' cried Aylmer, laughing in spite of himself.

The professor laughed too; suddenly he checked his merriment, laid his hand on Aylmer's arm, and said in an altered voice—

a voice positively sweet and tremulous with feeling:

'Don't think me a nuisance! See here—I have not been so fond of any two human beings in double the years you have lived as I am of you and her. Believe that, and let it be my excuse.'

'Dear old man! there is no excuse needed,' returned Aylmer, grasping his hand cordially. 'I don't in the least mind your knowing what is in my heart. I am glad to talk to you, since you are interested enough to care.'

'Care!' repeated the professor. 'We must care about something—something human, too. No matter how old and ugly we get, we never live beyond that necessity. I used to believe we could; I have grown wiser, and I know that existence would be more incomplete than it is were not this as much a truth as any axiom in geometry.'

Aylmer only answered by a pressure of the hand.

'Now, according to the verdict of the whole world, there can be no greater instance of folly than a man well on towards seventy holding such views; so if I called you a fool, you can console yourself by thinking it is much

worse to be one at my age than at yours,' continued the professor.

'Oh, I don't mind admitting that I am a fool, but you must give me something else than your last declaration as a proof of your folly before I believe in it.'

'That's because it happens to be you I like. Human vanity always stands in the way of a correct, cool judgment where self comes,' said the professor, dogmatically. 'Do you know what idea will disturb her when she begins to see the truth?'

Aylmer intuitively comprehended what his friend meant. He did not answer, but the savant went on as if he had received a reply:

'Yes, that will be it—her seniority. Now I dare say that as a rule it may be a mistake for a man to marry a woman older than himself—but she is an exception. She is more beautiful to-day than she was at twenty—look at her picture—and no older. At forty-five she will appear thirty—an affair of physique—one of those marvels Nature occasionally likes to show us, like——'

'Don't!' broke in Aylmer, certain that the professor, in his turn, was about to compare her to Ninon.

'Ah, I understand. But all that feeling about

De l'Enclos is stuff and prejudice. She followed natural selection. Well, well, don't fidget—leave that part. This woman to-day is years younger in face and feeling than you. By the time you are thirty-three you will be as grey as a badger where you are not bald, and so grave and worn that she will seem girlish beside you.'

'All that is nothing! If I could only believe she cared—could ever be brought to care!'

'Bosh! nonsense! You are as blind as a bat—blinder!' cried the professor. 'And you are going to work just the right way to lose her! Do you hear? to—lose—her!'

'I have tried every——'

'A great many too many! Leave her quiet, that is what you have to do. Rouse her suddenly, and you'll frighten her—she will arm herself with scruples and send you off! Let her alone, and she'll float on unconsciously till you will become too completely master for her even to struggle against your supremacy. Why, just the very name she gives you when we talk together shows me what delusive haze she blinds herself under—"our friend Laurence!"'

'Oh, friendship—friendship! she is always

bringing me back to that!' Aylmer cried impatiently.

'Exactly. I am old and ugly, but I know how she is to be managed better than you, young Adonis on a colossal scale though you be! I'd help you, if you would promise to obey implicitly.'

'I will promise; I am at the end of my own resources.'

'But you'll forget to keep your word; you'll hurry—go frantic—upset everything at some inopportune moment. No, take your own course; I'll not meddle—take it and lose her!'

'Come now, don't be a monster. Give me your idea.'

'Simply to carry out her pet theory—friendship—pure, simple, poetical, perfect friendship! Let her think she has convinced you that ought to be the only tie between you, that no fancy or whim any longer disturbs your peace. Of course you are not to adopt this line too abruptly; work up to it gradually.'

'After all, she wouldn't be a woman if she were content, even if she never learns to love me.'

'The first sensible thing you have said

yet. Of course she'll not be content, and her dissatisfaction, after trying to believe she has reached the state of affairs she wanted, will win you your prize.'

'To wait, to be patient when one's very heart is on fire!—I don't care if I am talking like a fool, it is such a relief!—do literally nothing——'

'That's your *rôle*—masterly inactivity. Always difficult for human nature; it wants to manage, direct—like me, for instance.'

'But your idea is the right one, I am convinced of that.'

'Then follow it, and in less than six months you will have reason to thank me for giving it. Come, I am going home to bed; I can't lose my sleep worrying over your affairs.'

He put his arm through Aylmer's with a gentleness that belied his brusque words, and they walked on in silence.

CHAPTER V.

A GIRL'S TROUBLES.

It must be admitted that the two cousins began their intercourse with certain preconceived opinions on either side which seemed likely to prevent a thorough understanding or warm friendship making rapid growth between them.

Mary was remorsefully conscious that on the day of her arrival she had behaved in a way which could scarcely fail to prejudice Violet against her, and this consciousness rendered her for a time troubled and embarrassed under her relative's good-natured effort towards acquaintance.

Unfortunately, embarrassment with Mary took a form which caused her to appear stiff and unresponsive. She was constantly haunted by the idea that she, a grown woman, had no right to settle down in idle content upon the bounty of another woman.

Worried too by fear that she must be awkward and provincial, liable at every turn to shock this elegant Violet, whom she saw courted by persons the very mention of whose names seemed to Mary like reading a romance. Mary did not mean the rich people or the people with grand titles who gladly bent at Miss Cameron's feet, but the authors and painters and sculptors she had dreamed of—men who had won a position in the world by their genius—to find herself in the same room with whom caused the girl's heart to thrill in that enthusiasm which is so charming at her age, laugh at it as cynically as we older critics may.

And Mary had a great horror of being laughed at; she would not for worlds have allowed anybody to know that a few days after her arrival in Florence she took advantage of Violet's and Miss Bronson's absence, and while Clarice supposed her tranquilly and correctly strolling about the garden, she had entered a cab, given the order 'Casa Guidi' to the coachman, and driven away to worship the dwelling rendered sacred by having been the home of England's greatest poetess.

The coachman did not seem surprised that when they reached the house she sat still

and stared up at the windows; no doubt he had carried more than one young enthusiast on a similar errand. He descended from his perch and leaned in at the carriage-door, talking volubly, and though her limited knowledge of Italian prevented her understanding all that he said, she did comprehend that he was speaking of Elisabetta Browninga and claiming her as '*la nostra*' with as much assurance as he would have done Michel Angelo, and she felt unlimited confidence in him at once.

That confidence was a little shaken presently. On gaining the street that led into the piazza where the Amaldi Palace stood, she motioned him to stop; but when she tendered the legal fare he unblushingly, though very insinuatingly, demanded double the sum. Mary, in spite of her romance, was a practical soul, and she had taken pains in advance to ask Miss Bronson casually the price per hour; and now, though frightened, she laid on the seat the correct amount, and informed the faithless man by a very expressive gesture that he could take it or leave it at his pleasure—she was not to be cheated. And he understood as plainly as if she had spoken in pure Tuscan, and liked her the better for her shrewdness, assisting her

with elaborate courtesy to alight, and, Italian-like, sending a benediction after her pretty face into the bargain.

Mary felt guilty, but very happy, as she hurried through the square and entered the house, unperceived as she fondly hoped. She might have been, so far as the ducal-looking porter was concerned, for he sat serenely dozing in the depths of his retreat; but unfortunately the Argus-eyed Antonio, returning from his daily walk, crossed the street just as she stopped the carriage. Antonio gave one glance to assure himself that his wondering sight had not cheated him, then plunged into the shadow of a *porte-cochère*, and watched to see what she would do next. Hurrying home as fast as her feet would carry her; but where had she been?—that was the question! Antonio's heart sank beneath a virtuous pang! He had served in too many high and mighty families, and grown familiar with 'the ways that are dark' of too many demoiselles of lofty descent, not to entertain certain suspicions in regard to her escapade, and indeed the only thing which astonished him was that he could have been sufficiently mistaken in this fawn-eyed American girl to feel any surprise.

'But she looked so innocent—she did indeed; and to think of my being deluded by that!' Antonio thought. Then, a little to soften his feeling of humiliation, he added: 'After all, she is a woman! Solomon himself was deceived to the last!'

All day and all the evening did Antonio meditate over his discovery, and try for means to warn Miss Cameron that she ought to keep a sharper watch upon her cousin, without at the same time exposing the young lady's delinquency; for, in spite of the belief forced upon him by experience, he hesitated to believe as ill of this innocent-looking creature as his reflections warned him it was his duty to do.

He bore his indecision and trouble with the exemplary patience which characterised him; attended on the ladies at dinner; even deprived himself of the solace of his club in order to have ample leisure to decide upon his line of conduct. But when his mistress came home from the opera and paused in the anteroom to speak a pleasant word to him as was her wont, duty conquered. He must be just to his lady, even though he sacrificed the demoiselle with eyes like a fawn and tricks that would have been appropriate to some more feline-orbed animal.

'Signora!' he sighed, as Miss Cameron moved on. His voice sounded so doleful that Violet turned back, and as she glanced at him the mournful expression of his face, eloquent with sorrow and a determination to fulfil his duty at all costs, caused her to smile, supposing, from her knowledge of his character, that an infinitesimal dereliction on his own part, or that of some other member of the household, occasioned this tragic demeanour.

'What is it?' she asked, laughing. 'Have you broken one of my china images, or has Clarice smiled at the new footman?'

And to excuse her lack of dignity, I must remind the reader she had lived so long in France and Italy that she had forgotten it was indecorous to address a servant as a human being, even after years of such attachment as Antonio had shown.

'Ah, mademoiselle, it is more serious than that,' replied Antonio, looking ready to cry.

He told his story at last, with much circumlocution and all sorts of kindly efforts to soften the blow, and thus rendered his account enigmatical and appalling. Violet's first impulse was to tell him a fib—say that she had been aware of the expedition. But she knew that such shallow subterfuge could not deceive

Antonio; on the contrary, any attempt to screen the delinquent would only rouse darker suspicions in his mind, so she said gravely:

'You were quite right to tell me, but you must not think my cousin had any secret to keep—she probably wanted to visit one of the galleries or churches by herself. You know English and American girls, when they are new to the Continent, forget that many things, perfectly correct at home, are not permissible here.'

Antonio caught eagerly at this possible excuse for the stranger, in favour of whom he had the prejudice any man, whatever his degree, has for a pretty face, and after begging mademoiselle to excuse his interference, and to believe that he was actuated by a strict sense of duty, he bowed himself out of the room.

Violet felt it necessary to speak to Mary, and though she had not a shadow of doubt as to the entire innocence of the expedition, she dreaded rendering the task of making acquaintance with her cousin more difficult by assuming the character of judge or inquisitor.

'She gets on better with Miss Bronson,'

thought Violet; 'but if I set poor Eliza to arrange the matter, she will blunder, and cause Mary to believe me a regular Gorgon. Really, although I was a governess for so many years, I am afraid nature did not mean me to be a guardian of young ladies. I am quite at a loss what to do.'

As soon as she had taken off her evening dress, and had her heavy masses of hair freed from their confinement and left to stray over her shoulders in a fashion which made her perfectly bewildering in her loveliness, she sent Clarice away, and sat down to meditate upon the wisest course of conduct—naturally first pausing to cast a little blame on poor Antonio.

'If he hadn't eyes all over his head, and wasn't always in twenty places at once, he would not have seen her, and then there would be no difficulty,' she reflected impatiently.

The doors which connected the rooms that comprised her suite of private apartments stood open according to habit, a sense of space being one of the necessities of her nature. She began walking up and down—'prowling,' as Nina Magnoletti styled the performance, with that intimate knowledge of English,

including even slang-phrases, which characterises an educated Russian.

As Violet paused in her march, and stood in her bed-chamber, she was startled by a sound like a stifled sob. She listened, and presently heard the noise more distinctly. Her fancy had not deceived her—it was a sob, and it came from her cousin's room.

She pushed back the thick curtains which hung over the arch, opened the door, and entered. A night-lamp burned dimly on a table; by its light she could see Mary sitting up in bed, weeping as if her heart would break.

Whatever its cause, there was a real sorrow here, and Violet forgot everything in her desire to soothe it.

'Mary!' she said, moving quickly across the floor. 'Dear little cousin, what is the matter? Don't think we are strangers—remember that we are relatives—that I want to love you very much! If you have any trouble, let me share it.'

'Oh, oh!' shivered Mary, in a fright at this sudden entrance. But the touch of the caressing arms folded about her subdued the alarm, and presently she was able to answer Violet's pleadings. 'It's only that I'm a fool

—no less. I have been ever since I got here! There is nothing else the matter. I am so sorry I wakened you; I forgot that your bedroom was next. I didn't mean to make a noise—indeed I did not.'

'Then I am glad you sobbed louder than you intended,' returned Violet, speaking playfully, in the hope of thus restoring her composure.

'You—you will hate me for disturbing you!' groaned Mary.

'Why, what a cross old thing you must think me!' said Violet, with good-natured raillery.

'No, no! You are so beautiful—and you seem so young! Why, that's part of it! Every time I look at you I am so ashamed of that contemptible little speech the day I came.'

'Part of what, dear? Come now, don't cry! Let's get at the bottom of the matter and understand each other, and be good friends. I often feel the need of a sensible little body to whom I can tell all my nonsensical feelings,' said Violet, inspired by a great sympathy for the poor girl as she remembered the troubles which had come so suddenly upon her own girlhood; conscious too that

she had rather put Mary aside since her arrival, and remorseful from a fear that the child's distress might rise out of this very fact.

'Oh, I used to think I was sensible,' replied Mary, drying her eyes with the sleeve of her night-gown, 'but I have behaved so like an idiot ever since I came, that I begin to believe I must always have been one without knowing it.'

'The thing is not to find it out,' said Violet; 'I've no doubt I have been a goose for a great deal longer than you are years old, but I prefer to remain innocent of the knowledge.'

She laughed and made Mary laugh too, though in a somewhat tumultuous, nervous fashion.

'You are so good to me!' cried she. 'And that makes me feel all the more guilty!'

'Good heavens, child, don't say such things!' exclaimed Violet, a little startled by the strong term the girl employed, even while telling herself it had no significance—proceeded merely from the exaggeration of thought and language natural at eighteen. 'Just tell me what you do mean! Come, dear, this is quite the hour for confidence;

maybe you and I will not find in months so good an opportunity for getting really acquainted and growing fond of each other as we ought to be, since neither possesses another near relative in the world.'

'That is it too—just another part of it!' cried Mary, and the very assurance she appeared to have that her exclamation rendered her troubles clear, left the phrase still more mysterious and annoying.

'A part of what?' demanded Violet, inclined to grow exasperated, as one is when self-convicted of having been impulsive, even 'gushing,' to no purpose. But she controlled her impatience, and added, 'Now begin at the beginning, as the children say when they are promised a story. I can't answer as I ought if you talk in riddles.'

'Oh, I am so stupid!' replied Mary.

Violet caught herself thinking rather cynically that doubtless some bit of girlish romantic folly lay at the bottom of this agitation—that really it required more patience than she possessed to fill well her *rôle* of elder cousin if such scenes were to occur frequently! Yes, yes; some missish fancy and disappointment—some elegy over a disturbed dream as empty as it was poetical

—these were the sorrows she must hear chanted. Could the hero be Laurence Aylmer? She stopped short in her reflection, called herself a heartless, crabbed, envious old maid, and held Mary tighter in her embrace, determined not only to display, but to feel sympathy, whatever the tidings which awaited her.

'A part of what, childie?' she repeated, pressing her lips on Mary's forehead. 'There! I seldom kiss even Nina Magnoletti; if that does not unlock your pretty mouth I am at the end of my resources,' and was quite unaware what absolute arrogance and complete faith in the potency of her own fascinations the sentence implied.

'Yes,' said Mary, speaking somewhat breathlessly; 'I'll tell you—I'd rather tell you; I mightn't get the courage again, and I should seem so ungrateful! But I could not stay—indeed I could not, unless—unless we had it out,' she added, taking refuge in the expressive school-girl phrase, after trying in vain to substitute one more elegant. 'If you really do blame him, it would be so mean of me to live on—on your bounty—and oh, I hate the idea, anyway! I am grown up; I ought to take care of myself—and then it seems more wicked than all the rest to

think of that! And oh, sometimes I wish I had been drowned coming over, and then there would have been an end of it all!'

She pushed Violet almost harshly away, and buried her head in the pillow; and Violet, certain now that she had to deal with some real sorrow, forgot her impatience, put aside every personal sensation in her longing to comfort this girlish sufferer, who looked like the phantom of her own early youth, moaning in the desolation which overtook it so unexpectedly, but which no human creature had possessed the power or even the desire to console.

Violet was too thoroughly versed in the ways of her sex to increase Mary's agitation by petting or weeping with her, though, as a reversion from her recent cynical thoughts, she felt strongly inclined to lay her head down by Mary's and sob too. For no reason, she took pains to assure her conscience, only because ashamed of her own hardness, and because the sight of tears always made any woman a little hysterical. Women were always wretchedly weak creatures, she mentally added, with a misanthropy for which she would have soundly rated Nina Magnoletti, had she ventured to display it.

'Now you are such a sensible little body,' said Violet, calling herself to account as well as Mary, in this assurance, 'that I know you mean to sit up directly and tell me all about it! Why should you think of going away? My dear, your natural home is with me. Girls must have a home, however clever and brave they may be; I know that by experience.'

'Why, that's the rest of it!' cried Mary, lifting her tear-stained face.

'Good!' pronounced Violet. 'Now that we have arrived at the whole, in its entirety, as the newspapers say, try to make me understand what it is all about.'

'She said it was through papa,' returned Mary, with an ominous sob, quickly checked. 'He lost your money, and you had to go to teaching! And oh, if you think he did it on purpose—if you think he wasn't honest, let me go away! I'd rather starve than live with anybody who could believe ill of my father!'

'Ah, it is all clear!' exclaimed Violet, with an odd feeling of relief at discovering that Mary's trouble related to her dead parent. 'Eliza Bronson has been talking to you. My poor Eliza! she is the best soul in the world,

and whatever she ought not to say is the very thing she always says. My dear, you must learn not to mind her talk; if I did, a hundred times a day I should think myself a lost soul, both for this world and the next.'

'You want to make me laugh—you want to turn it off!' cried Mary. 'I'll not let you—it is not kind! If I am to speak out, you must also! He did lose your money—she said so—but oh, if you think he was dishonest——'

'I have no harsh feeling towards your father, Mary,' Violet interrupted; 'if I had, I should not have asked you to live in my house. I have the letters he wrote me; you shall read them; they will satisfy you;' and she was careful to put no audible emphasis on the final pronoun, though she did internally. 'My father's affairs were left in a bad state by his sudden death; my cousin George did what he could; you will see that by his letters. Now understand that I have no harsh feeling in my mind.'

'Oh, I knew nobody could blame papa who really was acquainted with him!' said Mary, then adding quickly, 'But you went to earn your living; you did not stop dependent on him!'

'Your father was at that time in difficulties himself—he told me so,' Violet replied, giving that last clause a significance to her own mind which did not reach Mary's. 'He offered me a home—recollect that! Come, do not make me say that I was headstrong and obstinate, in order to convince you that you would be wrong to rush out to battle with the world, when you can be guarded and taken care of—have love, too, if you will accept it.'

'Indeed I will!' cried Mary. 'I'm more ashamed than ever of myself—but I am glad it has all been said! Oh, I have been so lonesome—tormented myself so!'

'My dear, perhaps I was wrong to leave you so much. I thought you would get on better first with Eliza, as you seemed a little shy with me. I forgot her unfortunate genius for blundering.'

'Oh, that is no matter now—don't blame her!' said Mary. 'And it was my fault that you left me to her. Oh, I have been so ashamed; I don't know what ailed me the day I got here. Why, I made a regular prickly pear of myself!'

'Let us say a moss rose-bud, very imperfectly developed,' laughed Violet, glad so

easily to have set the girl's mind at rest. 'But you understand that I did not mean to be selfish. As your mourning prevents your going into society, I thought Eliza would take you about to the galleries, and see after Italian lessons and music, if you liked it.'

'Oh, she is very good,' sighed Mary. 'I *am* so wicked! Now, I love music, but I can't bear to study the piano, and she was so hurt when I said it. And she wants me to write long letters to nobody, to improve my style. And, oh, Violet, it seems sacrilege to hear her talk in the galleries! She won't let me admire anything unless the guide-book says I shall, and she drives me quite frantic! I am so bad!'

'So am I—be consoled,' returned Violet. 'Come, you shan't be given over to her tender mercies! You see, you are such a prim, proper little thing, that I never dreamed of your showing your relationship to me by having an ill-regulated mind.'

'Oh, I shall never be like you!' said Mary. 'And she says—Miss Bronson says—it is immodest to draw from casts, and that is the only thing I care for; and I hoped sometime, perhaps, I could be a sculptor — other

women have. Oh, don't think I'm a fool! And when she saw, by accident, a little figure I had tried to do, she cried and wrung her hands, and begged me never to let anybody dream that I had any such talent; she said it was so unladylike.'

'My good Eliza! Well, well, I am neither good nor ladylike, according to her ideas! To-morrow we will look at that figure.'

'Oh, I broke it!' interrupted Mary—'I did! She thought I was penitent, but I was angry—and I oughtn't to have been. You can see how horrid I am!'

Here was her commonplace little charge turning out an embryo artist, with aspirations and longings; well, Violet liked that better than the prosaic conception of her own to which she had given the girl's name. They conversed for a long time, and Mary had completely recovered her peace of mind before Violet remembered Antonio's revelation, and then it was difficult to speak, but she did, and found relief in Mary's confession.

'I am so glad to find you are a romantic puss,' said she. 'I felt quite afraid of you, you seemed so superior.'

'Oh! And I thought you would consider me an idiot!'

'My dear, I once walked ten miles to sit on a stone where they said Washington Irving used to sit. There, now you perceive that where what Eliza would call folly, is concerned, I can sympathise to any extent.'

They might have talked on, oblivious of the lapse of time—Mary entranced, Violet feeling more and more as if she were holding communion with that dreamy phantom of her girlhood — but they were disturbed by a sudden loud knocking on the wall in Miss Bronson's bedroom.

'Oh, good gracious!' exclaimed Violet, 'we have wakened her; oh, shan't we catch it! I feel as if we were both in a boarding-school, and had just been surprised *in flagrante delictu* by the lady-abbess.'

'She's coming—I hear her!' whispered Mary, choking with laughter.

The corridor-door opened, and the spinster appeared on the threshold, looking about ten feet high in a loose flannel dressing-gown, with a row of curl papers sticking out like miniature horns along her forehead. She carried a candle in her hand, which she held aloft, regarding the pair with great severity.

'Is either of you ill?' she asked.

'No, no,' said Violet; 'we got to talking, and didn't remember how late it was.'

'And we are so sorry to have disturbed you!' added Mary.

'That is of no consequence, though of course now I must lie awake the rest of the night,' returned Miss Bronson; 'but it is important to keep regular hours at Mary Danvers's age. Violet, I am surprised at your forgetting the fact.'

'I'm a miserable sinner; I'll never do it again—please don't scold!'

'I hope I never scold,' said the spinster, in an injured tone.

'Oh, Eliza, you do look so funny!' cried Violet, giving way to her laughter, in which Mary joined.

Miss Bronson read them a long lecture on their present iniquity and the general misconduct of their lives, then consented to be appeased, and was made to laugh too, and forgot to drive them to bed till a full half-hour afterward.

CHAPTER VI.

BEFORE THE POPE'S PORTRAIT.

So, sooner than could have been expected from the unpromising aspect of affairs on her arrival, Mary Danvers found her own particular niche in her cousin's home—fitted into it so perfectly that she was at ease herself and a pleasure and satisfaction to Violet and her household.

Miss Bronson was highly elated at the good understanding between the two, and expressed her sentiments with a delicious blunder-headedness which, in the case of many women, would have served to alienate the two relatives for ever.

'I told you how sweet she was; I begged you to have patience and study her. I am glad that I have convinced you at last!' she would say to Violet.

'My dear, you had only one grave fault in my eyes—I thought you did not quite—

quite do justice to your incomparable cousin!' was her reproachful plaint to Mary.

Now in order fully to appreciate the situation, it must be understood that she uttered these remarks when both ladies were in the room ; calling first one, then the other, under transparent pretexts of asking advice concerning her worsted-work, or to read aloud some passage from a book, and framing her jubilant sentences in a tone perfectly audible to whichever of the pair she supposed in delightful ignorance of her words.

Violet and Mary laughed heartily in private over her manias, and the fact of sharing a secret subject of amusement brought them still closer together, as such confidences always do people who have a keen sense of the ludicrous ; and that quality Mary Danvers proved, to Violet's satisfaction, to possess in a high state of development, in spite of her demure ways.

And Violet, influenced by complex motives, as people usually are in their conduct, gave a great deal of time to her young cousin's society ; partly because she was attracted towards the girl now that she found what an impetuous, aspiring soul lived under that restrained exterior, partly out of kind-

ness, in order that the child might not again feel lonely and desolate ; and a little from her spoiled princess gratification in a new plaything. But she remained unconscious that this latter reason existed, and it is only justice to her to add that she would have been heartily ashamed of her own pettiness had she discovered the fact.

She spent a great many mornings in going about to the galleries with her charge, refusing engagements and denying herself to friends in order to do this, and was amply repaid for any slight sacrifice of pleasure by Mary's enthusiastic delight, which, her fears once removed, she displayed to Violet as freely as if she had been thinking aloud.

The more she became acquainted with the girl the more genuine grew Violet's liking, and her impulsiveness—that long and uselessly-combated weakness of her nature—helped to render her admiring, because she recollected with a somewhat exaggerated self-reproach, that at first she had been inclined to underrate her relation.

The very discrepancies in Mary's character interested, even pleased her. The girl had led a life of singular repression between the two antagonistic influences—her father's and

stepmother's—under which she had grown up. Violet, in her fanciful way, used secretly to compare her to a wild flower early transplanted into a garden and taught to grow primly and according to rule, taking so kindly to the training that it learned to stand erect and well-regulated, only showing here and there, if one examined closely, certain tendrils beneath its leaves stretching out to the right and left in a discursive fashion, which gave signs of the adventurous spirit it would have possessed had it been left free to follow the dictates of nature.

Mary would not in the least have answered for a modern girl-heroine, according to the type presented in autobiographical novels written by the women of our day. These heroines are always blowsy, not to say dirty; great stress is laid upon the fact that their dresses are invariably crumpled and torn, their shoes down at the heel, and their hair in a state of disorder which defies description. These heroines never 'weep' as those of old fashioned romances did; they never cry as girls do in real life—they 'blubber;' they never laugh either—they 'yell'; they never kiss their fathers, they 'give the governor a resounding smack on each side his dear old

ugly face, which knocks his hat off'; and when the unexpected appearance of their lovers causes them any emotion, it is not what the antiquated novelists would have called 'a thrill of blissful confusion,' nor what we should term in ordinary parlance a natural embarrassment, it is 'a red-hot sensation from head to foot, which makes their backs tingle as if somebody had applied a hissing flat-iron to the tenderest spot in their spinal marrow.'

She was, in fact, a lady, a gentlewoman in thought and action, such as we happily find numerous examples of in real life, though, if we were to trust to the veracity of those afore-mentioned modern heroines, who relate the story of their youth in language as startling as the sentiments, principles, and adventures which it portrays, we should believe the species had utterly disappeared from among the human race.

Faults enough she certainly had—the faults of her age; hasty temper, bursts of impatience, a yielding to impulse, thereby cracking the fine varnish of conventional breeding in a way which older people learn to avoid—but she was a lady.

She had not been fostered into precociously,

becoming a woman in feelings and views of life; she was exactly what she ought to have been at her years—a girl, and a healthy, pure-minded girl, with all the charms and asperities which belong to that season.

Violet's laughing comparison was perhaps the best that could have been applied—a moss rosebud a little too well enveloped; still, for those who had eyes to see, the tender bloom which heralded the perfection of the flower was distinctly visible.

And Violet enjoyed her companionship, as imaginative people past their youth do enjoy the society of what is young and fresh, provided those people are free enough from envy and jealousy—though of course hiding their real sentiments from themselves under reproaches directed towards the frivolousness, ignorance, and presumption of adolescence—to be able to appreciate it.

Her friends began to grumble at what they termed her neglect of obvious duty—namely, attention to themselves—since the arrival of the cousin to whom she was determined to prove that she had fallen into thoroughly sympathetic guardianship—and the first and loudest among these grumblers were Nina Magnoletti and Mr. Aylmer.

'One never sees you lately,' that gentleman said one night when he met her at Lady Harcourt's.

'Just what I have been telling her,' cried Nina. 'It is positively shameful!'

'It strikes me that I saw you both last evening—twice even—once at the opera, and afterwards at the Morellis',' returned Violet. 'My memory is better than yours. Seeing me makes so little impression on your minds that you forget the fact within twenty-four hours.'

'Of course she would manage in some way to twist our reproaches so as to put us in the wrong, Mr. Aylmer,' said Nina.

'And she knows very well what we meant,' rejoined he. 'Her doors are hermetically sealed! Now and then she appears late in the evening at somebody's reception or ball—flashes past one like a meteor, and is gone.'

'I think that is blank verse,' retorted Violet, 'and everybody knows that poetry is not truth.'

'What an awful heresy, Miss Cameron!'

'And only uttered to avoid telling the truth herself,' said Nina. 'Now, misguided young woman, I insist on knowing where all your mornings have been spent for the last

week? I have called, heaven knows how many times, at your house, and the answer was always the same—out, and nobody had an idea where! To say the least, such conduct is very mysterious, and Florence does not permit mysteries. People may be as wicked as they like, but they must not make a secret of their peccadilloes.'

'If either of you ever visited a picture-gallery, or any other place improving to the mind, you might have found me,' said Violet.

'I flatter myself that my dwelling comes within that catalogue, and you certainly have not been seen there,' returned Nina.

'Well, if you had called it a museum of unnatural curiosities, considering the people you and Carlo get about you, I might have agreed with your remark,' said Violet.

'And as I go there almost daily, permit me to thank you, Miss Cameron, for my share in the compliment,' cried Aylmer.

'She is hopelessly hardened in her sins,' sighed Nina. 'It is all the fault of that wretched little new cousin—I hate her!'

'That's because she is pretty,' said Violet.

'The same reason would not apply to Mr. Aylmer, since he is a man,' replied Nina, 'and he hates her too.'

Aylmer laughed. Was his laughter slightly constrained, or did Violet only fancy so?

'Why don't you leave your Bronson to show her the sights?' pursued Nina. 'She is a walking encyclopedia of knowledge, and her society might be of service to the child, while you are as ignorant as the rest of us, and can be of no benefit whatever to her mind! I wish she had stayed in her native wilds, or been drowned in crossing the ocean, if she is to usurp your attention in this way.'

So it came about that only the next day, as Violet and Mary were standing in the Apollo salon of the Pitti Gallery, Violet perceived Laurence Aylmer in one of the smaller rooms opposite, conversing with a gentleman. She made another discovery at the same instant—it was that Mary saw him too, turned, and became absorbed in Raphael's portrait of Leo X., with dark, inscrutable-eyed Cardinal Medici standing beside the pope. But she did not move quickly enough, for Violet caught the sudden colour which bloomed like sweetbriar blossoms into her usually rather pale cheeks.

The two men were standing with their backs towards the ladies. Violet's first im-

pulse was to turn away as Mary had done, but she checked it. She did not choose to be fluttered, missish, silly; she would not stir. She had time to think this and many other things in rapid succession; uppermost rushed the thought born in her mind the day of Mary's arrival—the girl loved Laurence Aylmer! And he would love Mary. His fancy for Violet Cameron would fade speedily, as it ought—for Violet past her youth—Violet, who had no business with dreams such as were fitting at her cousin's age! Why, presently she should be ancient, wrinkled, withered—old maid that she was! Of course Aylmer would turn to this opening bud, which possessed the charm of promise that the already fading rose had lost.

And Mary loved him! Here was an additional reason why she, Violet, should prove incapable of the preposterous folly of caring for a man younger than herself. His caprice would not last! No man could love (no, she meant admire—lose his head over—some term that expressed folly or temporary aberration of intellect, was the most applicable!) for any length of time, a woman so many years his senior! And Mary loved him, and Mary should have her happiness!

No doubt when he met the girl in America, Aylmer had been attracted towards her, but was unaware of the impression he had made. Violet would not admit the possibility of his being a trifler—capable of wittingly gaining the innocent creature's heart and flinging it carelessly aside—no, no !

Circumstances had abruptly called him away before he learned the truth ; here, in Europe, he had encountered this Violet Cameron, and had conceived for her one of those brief infatuations such as his sex will in similar case—the wisest and best men being weak creatures ! But the delusion must die out rapidly, now that fate had again flung Mary in his path. He would quickly learn the difference between illusion and reality—fancy and affection ! Why once, as a compliment to the girl (long ago—oh, that first night at Nina's house !) he had said that she reminded him of Miss Cameron. Ah, he would discover that the compliment had been to Violet herself in suggesting that she retained sufficient signs of youth to leave any trace of resemblance between her and this child, whose face was holy as dawn, with waking hopes and dreams.

But Aylmer and his companion had caught

sight of the pair, and as they approached, Violet perceived that the latter gentleman was well known to her; a young artist who had not been in Florence since her return—a great favourite with her, too.

Seeing him gave her a reason for greeting Aylmer rather briefly, and hastening to welcome the new-comer.

'Why, Gilbert Warner!' she exclaimed. 'What an unexpected pleasure! How very glad I am to see you! I thought you had vanished for ever. Where have you been—to the Antipodes?'

'Only to America,' he answered, shaking her hand with unfashionable fervour, excusable since he was a painter, not a dandy.

But while Violet poured forth a torrent of questions and ejaculations with an animation less pardonable than his warmth, since she ranked among the order of fine ladies, and so ought to have been incapable of enthusiasm, she was not so absorbed but what she could observe the meeting between Mary and Aylmer.

'Are you so lost in admiration of that wicked pope that one may not even say good-morning?' he asked.

She turned and gave him her hand, but

her laugh sounded nervous; and Violet, strong in her determination to be of service, would not leave the girl to betray her confusion.

'Mary,' she called, 'let me present my friend Mr. Warner——'

'I have had the pleasure of meeting Miss Danvers,' broke in that gentleman, quickly; 'we were fellow-passengers across the ocean. I trust she has not forgotten me!'

He hurried up to Mary, and Violet gave her another rapid glance, wondering if by any possibility she had been mistaken as to the person who had caused the girl's little agitation.

No; it was not Gilbert Warner. Mary held out her hand to him with exemplary composure—answered his greetings as calmly as even Eliza Bronson could have considered fitting for the manner of a young lady; and so far from colouring, looked almost pale again—else the contrast to that recent vivid flush made her appear so.

Then, as was her duty, Miss Cameron took the adjusting of matters into her own control. She began to talk, and kept the conversation general for a few minutes. They all walked on to look at the pictures in the

farther rooms, and Violet, with her woman's quickness, perceived that Mary (involuntarily, Violet did her the justice to think) half turned from the artist, as if to claim Aylmer's companionship.

So it should be, Violet decided, and she addressed some remark to Warner which brought him to her side; she detained him there, as they strolled along, leaving the other pair to follow.

When Miss Cameron announced that it was time for her and Mary to go, the gentlemen accompanied them downstairs.

'Remember, I shall expect to see you immediately, you runaway!' Violet said to Warner, in that gracefully autocratic fashion of hers, which men found so irresistible. 'I shall come very soon for a peep at your new sketches; but recollect, no pretence of work will serve as an excuse for neglecting me!'

Warner persuaded her to set the next day for visiting his studio with her cousin: then Aylmer claimed her attention, and Violet had not time to notice that the painter looked at Mary with as much gratitude as if the promise had come from her; but Mary was busy extricating a bow of her cousin's dress which

had caught in the carriage-door, and did not raise her eyes.

The two men stood watching the landau as it rolled down the descent in front of the palace, and Warner said :

'Upon my word, Miss Cameron is more beautiful than ever. She ought to have been Empress of all the Russias. Yet, though she shows so plainly that she is accustomed to have the whole world on its knees when she passes, she is as natural and unaffected as a child.'

Aylmer's first thought was that which always enters the masculine mind when another man ventures to praise the special object of the listener's admiration—'Like your impudence indeed!'—and his next to feel his heart warm suddenly towards his friend, because he had eyes and brains to appreciate his deity's loveliness.

'I am awfully glad you have come back to Florence, Warner,' cried he, enthusiastically and irrelevantly. 'I was thinking about you the other day, and hoping you would get here before the winter ended.'

And, as the carriage passed down the narrow street towards the Ponte Vecchio, Violet said :

'Such a charming man, and so good! You know him already.'

'Why—yes—oh, you mean Mr. Warner?' said Mary, coming out of a reverie with another blush, which faded too quickly as she went on to speak of him for any probability that it or the start with which she roused herself to answer had the slightest connection with his name. 'Yes; he is a relative of Mrs. Forrester's. He came to see us very often in New York before we sailed, and was very kind and good-natured during the voyage.'

'And you never remembered to speak of him, you ungrateful puss!'

'We have had so much to talk about, I've had no time to recollect my journey; and you did not speak of him either,' said Mary.

The carriage had reached that quaintest of mediæval bridges, and Mary became too busy regarding the odd little shops to have further leisure to bestow on Mr. Warner; as for Laurence Aylmer, his name found no mention from either of the ladies during their homeward drive.

They talked a great deal, however, and Mary was made happy by a decision that she should be allowed to pursue her inclinations.

An old sculptor of Violet's acquaintance had promised to let Mary enter his studio and have the benefit of his counsels; but it was agreed between the cousins that at present she must not allow her love for the plastic art to interfere with other studies. She should go to the studio a certain number of times each week, and work a certain number of hours. As Mr. Vaughton's atelier was on the same floor as his dwelling, and he had a good-natured sister, who would be only too glad to play chaperon to the young girl, there existed no necessity for troubling Miss Bronson.

'I wash my hands of the whole business,' Eliza said, when later she heard the affair discussed; and as she spoke she rubbed them violently with her pocket-handkerchief, as if the lavatory process were already finished, and she wiping away any last traces of responsibility which might still linger. 'I disapprove, but I remain silent. Water-colours in moderation, if young ladies please; though, to my mind, they are sticky things, and ruinous to one's dress—but sculpture! No, Violet, I cannot help wondering at your encouraging the child in a fancy which is positively unnatural—yes, I must say it—almost depraved!'

By this time Mary knew Miss Bronson too well to feel either frightened or hurt, and the professor, who chanced to be present when the news of Mary's intentions was broken to the spinster, highly enjoyed her dismay.

'You must do nothing by halves, Miss Mary,' he said. 'A thing worth doing at all is worth doing thoroughly.'

'And an improper thing touched ever so lightly is still improper,' cried Eliza, bridling, as she always did when she felt that she had uttered some emphatic truth.

'Half the people who call themselves sculptors know about as much of the human frame as—as our dear friend Miss Bronson does of those hypothetical human souls she likes to dream of.'

'Professor!' said Eliza, in mingled pain and wrath, 'at least spare that young girl those evil theories! Do not add to your sins by essaying to contaminate her youthful spirit.'

'No, no; I had something else in my mind,' returned the professor, with a chuckle. 'Fräulein Violet, little Miss Mary must study anatomy. I shall give her lessons myself, if you permit and she will accept me as teacher.'

For a moment Eliza sat speechless, staring

open-mouthed, straight before her, so Mary had an opportunity to say :

'Oh, how kind you are ! Do thank him, Violet !'

'My dear, your face is doing that better than I can,' said Violet, laughing in advance at the scene which she knew Eliza was about to make ; which the professor himself awaited with gleeful impatience.

'We will begin to-morrow, Miss Mary !' cried he. 'Now the bones of the——'

'One instant,' gasped Eliza ; 'one instant.'

'Certainly,' said the professor, with elaborate politeness.

'I desire to ask you a single question, Violet,' pursued Eliza, in a voice at once tremulous and dignified. 'Do you mean to allow this contamination of a youthful female mind, committed to your charge, to be carried into effect ?'

'I am afraid I must. You know how obstinate the professor is—he always will have his way,' said Violet, with mock sadness.

'And now about the bones—if I do not interrupt Miss Bronson,' continued the professor, with a profound bow towards the outraged spinster ; 'the bones of——'

'Mary Danvers!' broke in Eliza.

'Hers, if you like,' said the professor, 'as good an example as another.'

'Peace!' cried Eliza. 'Mary, I appeal to you! I urge you in the name of——'

'Too late!' interrupted the professor, in his turn. 'The lesson has begun. Now only listen, Miss Bronson. This is a fact which will interest you!'

'Violet, you must excuse me if I withdraw,' said Eliza, rising.

'Only just listen to this,' urged the professor. 'The bones——'

'Sir,' exclaimed Eliza, 'from this moment we are strangers, remember that—remember, too, my final words. There is an unpardonable sin—I believe you have reached it at last. After that, we are taught that judgment comes speedily and tarrieth not? If you cannot tremble, at least I trust these misguided creatures whom you are leading astray may be granted grace enough to do so.'

And Eliza swept from the room with a demeanour that was a happy mingling of stateliness worthy Queen Katherine, and a saintly resignation which would have enabled her to pose as a model for a picture of Alexandria's martyred virgin.

CHAPTER VII.

A BOLD STROKE.

The next day, while the cousins and Miss Bronson were seated at breakfast (one must call it so in accordance with continental customs, though served at noon), Violet said :

'Mary, we promised to go to Gilbert Warner's studio at one o'clock. He is in the same building as Mr. Vaughton, so we shall "kill two birds with one stone." I beg your pardon, Eliza. I know proverbs are vulgar, but don't look so shocked.'

'I was not thinking of the proverb,' returned the spinster mournfully, as she laid down her knife and fork with the air of a person whose appetite has been effectually destroyed by some untoward remark. 'It is this scheme of Mary's——'

'My dear, that is settled, and discussion

could only make Mary uncomfortable,' Violet interrupted good-naturedly, but firmly. 'Console yourself by remembering that talents are gifts, not matters of choice. If Mary has talent as a sculptor, it would be as wrong for us to attempt to interfere with its cultivation, as for her to neglect her powers.'

'I have no more to say,' Eliza answered. 'I have borne my testimony—my responsibility ends there.'

The cousins had much ado not to smile, and Violet changed the conversation; but Miss Bronson remained pensive and injured, refusing even to eat apricot-marmalade—her favourite sweetmeat.

'Will you go with us, Eliza, and see Mr Warner's new sketches?' Violet asked, as they rose from the table.

'Not to-day, if you will excuse me. Your real errand is to Mr. Vaughton; I could not answer to my conscience if by my presence I seemed tacitly to admit approval,' Miss Bronson replied, and she regarded the pair with mingled regret and condemnation.

So the cousins drove away alone, laughing a little between themselves at poor Eliza's scruples. They were received by the young painter with a delight which he took no pains

to conceal. After a brief conversation, while he showed Miss Cameron the sketches he had taken during his absence, Mary, who knew most of them by heart, strolled about regarding the collection of valuable curiosities and relics with which the studio abounded, for though not a rich man, Warner had already met with sufficient success in his profession to be able to indulge his artistic tastes in the furnishing of his atelier.

Presently Laurence Aylmer made his appearance, and again Violet noticed in Mary that slight agitation which meeting him seemed always to produce. Gilbert Warner observed the change also, and a cloud came over his bright, genial face; but it faded speedily when, a few moments later, he got Mary to himself under the pretext of showing her a rare old cabinet, while Violet and Aylmer were busy with the sketches.

Then the cousins went to visit Miss Vaughton, and arrange with her brother about the days on which Mary was to work, and from there they drove to Janetti's *bric-à-brac* shop to inquire about a present which Violet had ordered from Paris for Miss Bronson, to take the place of her much-regretted china dog with the red caudal extremity.

Miss Cameron left Mary standing near the door looking at a deliciously absurd porcelain mandarin squatted on a carpet, and walked to the farther end of the shop. Presently Mary hurried up and caught her arm so quickly that Violet looked round in surprise.

'What is the matter?' she asked. 'Why, how you tremble!'

'That dreadful man—I was frightened!' returned Mary, still rather breathless. 'He saw me and came in—oh! there he is!'

Violet turned and saw Giulia's Greek walking towards them; he had been pointed out to her, and she had at once conceived a strong aversion to his handsome, feline face.

'Do you mean him? What is it?' she asked.

'Oh, I didn't want to tell,' said Mary, more composedly, 'but I had better. He was in the railway-carriage with me from Pistoja. He eyed me so and talked so that I was frightened, and he followed me through the station, offering to see me to an hotel. Oh! that was what made me forget my trunks—and—and behave so, you know!'

The Greek was moving forward, his insolent eyes fixed on Mary. Violet stepped from

behind a great vase that concealed her and took Mary's arm.

'Come, my cousin,' she said aloud in French, and as they passed the Greek she looked full in his face with a menacing glance which there was no mistaking.

The fellow stood dumbfoundered for an instant; he recognised Miss Cameron, and knew that by his offensive gallantry to the pretty, unprotected girl in the railway-carriage, he had jeopardised his social standing in Florence.

The cousins passed on, and he watched them with an evil glance. The scorn in Miss Cameron's face did not touch him a whit, but he had been anxious to rank among her acquaintances, having already learned how important her favour would be; and now, there not only remained no possibility of that, but it was very probable she might cause her friends' doors to be shut against him.

He muttered a hearty curse, and, to add to his wrath, some hasty movement of his arm knocked a Viennese china cup and saucer off the counter, for the breaking of which he had to pay a hundred francs. He could hate with the ferocity of any other wild animal,

and a fierce desire to avenge his mishaps upon Violet Cameron sprang up in his mind.

As the carriage drove off, Mary told her little story:

'I was alone in the compartment; he got in at the last moment, else I should have changed. Oh, he was civil enough in what he said, but he frightened me. Luckily, at the next station but one, some ladies came in. I was ashamed to tell you. Girls have no business to meet with adventures. I feared you might blame me.'

'You know me better now, dear.'

'Yes, indeed! But, oh, when I got out in the station, and he kept by me, and—and—— Well, I won't think of it!'

'The wretched, panther-looking creature!' exclaimed Violet. 'He is fit to be Giulia da Rimini's friend! He was startled enough—he recognised me, and knows very well that I can punish him as he deserves.'

'Don't tell anybody—not even Miss Bronson!' pleaded Mary. 'Oh, I should be ashamed; promise, Violet!'

She was so earnest, that Miss Cameron gave her word not to mention the occurrence.

'Perhaps you are right,' she said; 'any-

way, he is not worth the trouble of punishing. I shall simply refuse to allow him to be introduced to me, if he should venture to attempt it.'

But the Greek was careful not to expose himself to such risk. The days went on; he perceived by the manner in which Miss Cameron's acquaintances treated him that she had not betrayed his conduct. They met several times at houses where the duchess had presented him, but he kept aloof from Violet's vicinity.

Indeed, it soon became evident that the Greek would not be troublesome in a society-way, and that inclined the men of Giulia's set to permit him more easily to glide into familiar acquaintance with themselves. Since he was content with occasionally appearing at a reception or ball, they did not mind riding and driving with him, allowing him the entry of the club, or gaming and supping with him.

The duchess's house was the only one he visited regularly. She knew that he watched her—made himself cognisant of her habits, her engagements, her associates—but she had recovered wholly from her fright, had matured her plans, and enjoyed the situation.

In a short time she perceived that she had gained a great advantage—the man had fallen in love with her; at least the passion was what both she and the Greek would have dignified by the name.

He displayed a strong jealousy of Laurence Aylmer, though Giulia considered that her subjugation of the American advanced very slowly. Could she have known the state of his mind, her belief that at least she was making progress would have been rudely dispelled. The duchess had become a positive burthen. She employed most adroitly the terms upon which she had managed to place him by her unwelcome confidence; she waylaid him on every possible occasion, sent for him to her house on plausible pretexts; and Aylmer saw more clearly each day in what a troublesome position he was put.

He still did not suppose that she desired to fascinate either his heart or fancy, but aside from the fact of her being the last woman towards whom he wished to act the part of sympathetic counsellor, he feared, certain of Miss Cameron's aversion towards her, that the appearance of intimacy which she began to parade whenever she could seize an opportunity, would injure him in the

quarter where a favourable opinion was of more importance in his eyes than the verdict of the whole world.

The duchess read that cherished secret clearly, but still without anger towards him. The struggle to gain a supremacy only increased her determination, and she grew more and more confident that, besides gratifying her whim, it would afford her revenge against Violet Cameron, upon whom she concentrated the wrath which Aylmer's insensibility aroused in her soul. If she could only subdue him, she should have no wish to prevent his marrying Violet; nay, she should be glad, and before the honeymoon ended, the haughty creature should learn that she, Giulia, stood between her and her husband. Naturally the duchess's vanity assured her that, once acquired, she could keep such hold, and her experience of men had not taught her to think any member of the sex likely to be much fettered by the marriage vow.

Carlo Magnoletti's conduct had at length convinced her that her power over him was completely lost, and she hated him almost as deeply as she did Miss Cameron. And Nina who, under the guise of friendliness, never met her without showing in face and words

that she exulted over her! actually daring to sting with veiled allusions and honeyed speeches—she who a few months before had been afraid to offend, lest Giulia should punish her through Carlo!

And everything was Violet Cameron's fault! Her revenge! Oh, she would have it, and it should include the trio! She could wait; she possessed the fortitude and nerve of a Red Indian; vengeance would taste the sweeter for this waiting—and it should come.

But in spite of other occupations, she found time to watch the Greek as narrowly as he did her. He was losing his head—she saw that; she would foil the duke with his own instrument—a second vengeance, exciting and pleasurable to her soul.

At first, as Dimetri's air of gallantry grew more pronounced, she feared he might be trying to fulfil his mission by fascinating her—putting her in an equivocal position towards himself which would afford the duke his wished-for proofs. But she was not afraid; even if that were his object she could baffle him, aye, and yet yield to the caprice which her affection for Aylmer did not prevent her indulging.

But the Greek's passion was no simulated matter; her experienced eyes soon discovered this by signs which the wariest and most astute man could not have feigned, and the knowledge rendered her task much easier. True, she never doubted that he would betray her just the same, unless she could make it for his interest to join her side—pecuniarily his interest, she meant; she could imagine none so potent—and she thought she could manage to do that; do it without putting her hand in her own purse, a meagre one this season from her losses at cards: and she knew only too well that she had exhausted the resources of borrowing in every quarter open to her, under every possible pretext, from that of wanting money for charity to pretending that she had been robbed of sums entrusted to her care, and if left unaided must suffer disgrace as lasting as it would be merited.

The Greek had been barely a fortnight in Florence before Giulia saw her way clear towards managing him, and with his assistance to carry out her plans for punishing Carlo and his wife, and dealing a first blow at Violet Cameron through her affection for them.

She must throw off disguises to a certain

extent, but she always deceived most successfully when she was not only in appearance but in reality frank, so far as a portion of her motives went. He had hitherto treated her with an affectation of respect which could be nothing but mockery from a confidant of the duke's, for the duke was one of the few people who knew her thoroughly. She had appeared unsuspicious of the man's being Da Rimini's spy, had refrained from a single harsh word against her husband, and given Dimetri the footing of a friend because of the source from whence he came. And now she learned something in regard to him which she could turn to use. A Sicilian who had formerly been the duke's courier passed through Florence, and came to pay his respects; he saw the Greek, and recognised him. They had been in San Francisco at the same time, and Massi knew that there Dimetri had met with a misfortune. In Paris and Vienna, though well known as a gamester, he was not suspected of being a cheat, but in California he had once been found out. However, he shot the discoverer across the card-table.

This was all Giulia wanted, not to employ as a threat—she did not wish him to suspect her knowledge; but now she saw how com-

pletely she could depend upon his aid. So many men who would stop at nothing else absolutely refused to cheat at cards—from dread of exposure, Giulia supposed, not because there could be any vice from which human beings would recoil. Massi only waited over a single train, so there was no danger of his betraying the Greek to anybody besides herself, and indeed he would in any case have been silent at her request.

The next morning the Greek presented himself, as had grown his daily habit, and found her seated in her dingily-magnificent boudoir, looking like one's ideal of a mediæval sorceress, in her black-and-gold-wrought amber draperies. She had a fondness for embroidery, and her skill in the art was marvellous. As he entered she was occupied with her favourite work. She set the frame on the table beside her and held out her hand, saying:

'You have come precisely at the right moment. Please be useful, and hold this skein of silk.'

He bent laughingly on one knee as she threw the scarlet threads over his fingers, gazing up into her face with a passionate light in his wicked black eyes.

'You are to look at the silk,' she said, with

a smile—not coquettish, she was too stately for that word to apply—'else you will tangle it hopelessly.'

'As you have done with my heart,' he answered boldly. It was the first time he had spoken any words beyond the gallantry which even idle fine ladies, who consider themselves strict, regard as quite permissible. 'You certainly are the most beautiful woman in the world! It is for me to beg *you* not to look; you make me dizzy!'

'So that is part of your plan,' she said, smiling still.

'My plan?' he echoed. 'I don't understand.'

'But I do,' she said. 'Signor Dimetri, how much did my husband promise to give you if you got him proofs that would obtain him a separation on his own terms?'

The Greek started to his feet.

'You insult me, madam!' he cried; and, though his indignation might be acting, his astonishment to find himself discovered was genuine enough.

'You are tangling my silk,' she said softly. 'Please to go down on your knees again. So—now we can talk quietly.'

'Great heavens!' he exclaimed; 'how could you speak to me like that?'

'Because I want to know,' she answered. 'I may be able to offer a better bargain than his.'

'You torture me!' he cried. 'You know your power over me, and use it—oh, shame, shame, to wound me like this! I had not spoken—if my eyes told my story it was not my fault—and you punish me with such words! Am I to blame because I could not resist your witcheries, because I adore you——'

'You may get up now; the skein is wound,' she interrupted, in an unaltered voice. Then, as he sprang to his feet again, she continued: 'So you have decided to make love to me yourself, since you find there is no other man whose folly or mine will help you to win your wages.'

'I cannot bear this!' he exclaimed, and hurried towards the door—looked back and added, 'I have been wrong—mad—but oh! if you had any heart you would pity too much what I suffer to stab me with such a relentless hand!'

'Come here,' she said gently.

He complied, crying out against her cruelty in eloquent phrases.

'I am a fool—a coward to obey,' he

faltered. 'Ah, say you did not mean it—say that you do not believe me false and vile!'

'Falsehood and truth are only words,' said the duchess. 'There is nothing so important as money! The man is honest who wins his salary by thoroughly doing his work.'

'Again! You call me back to outrage me anew!'

'You are only wasting your opportunities, Signor Dimetri,' said she. 'I am not angry. I admire your courage, but I am not a weak woman—I mean to turn my husband's weapons against himself! You love me, and I know it—he should have remembered that possibility when he sent you here.'

'I do love you, but you cannot think——'

'Let us leave that part. You are too shrewd not to see that acting is useless with me.'

'Yes—he did beg me—I own it. I refused——'

'At least you will aid me instead of him, since you love me—if I can make it worth your while?'

'Only a word, a hope, and I am your slave!'

'Don't get on your knees, please. Sit there, opposite me—so. Look in my face;

study it well. If I lie, you are keen enough to discover it. You can't earn your money, for the simple reason that I have no lover.'

It was useless to peruse that inscrutable countenance, which expressed what she desired it to do, and nothing more. He began to speak, but stopped abruptly.

'Say it,' she said calmly. 'I shall not be offended.'

'There is a man whom you—you——'

'You mean I flirt with Laurence Aylmer? I do. I would drive him mad if I could; I will tell you why. The woman whom I hate the most of all created beings, loves him—her name is Violet Cameron.'

'The American — curse her!' muttered Dimetri.

'She can know nothing of you. Are you afraid of her? I remember now—you have never tried to be presented. What is the reason?'

'I met a pretty girl in the train, and frightened her by talking a little nonsense; she turned out that woman's cousin,' he replied, and went on to relate Violet's treatment of him.

'I am glad of it,' the duchess said quietly;

'at least, you will be ready to help me where she is concerned.'

'And you hate her, because that Aylmer——'

'You had better let me explain my own motives,' she broke in; 'you can believe me or not, as you please.'

'I know about her making you trouble with Magnoletti,' he said, devouring her with his passionate, hungry eyes.

The duchess retained the most perfect composure; she knew that one thing at a time is the golden rule for doing all things well. Just now business was the matter of moment.

'He may be vexed if he likes,' she said, 'but he loves play too well not to come to my house, and he has about three hundred thousand francs ready money; when he has lost that, he and his fool of a wife may go their way.'

'He is very lucky at cards——'

'Heavens, don't I know it!' she interrupted coldly, impatient as her words sounded. 'But two people playing against him—two people with nerve and courage enough not to stop for the scruples that cowards call

honesty, could be more than a match for his luck.'

She looked full in his face and smiled. He started up and caught her hand in both his.

'You are a wonderful woman!' he exclaimed.

She drew her hand slowly away, still smiling in his eyes.

'Would half that inheritance of Carlo's overbalance Da Rimini's offer?' she asked.

'I will do anything—consent to anything—only say that you love me!' he cried.

She rose and stood leaning her hand on the table; any attitude she took always seemed the perfection of grace.

'When Violet Cameron is punished—when the Magnoletti are reduced to such straits that Nina's jewels are in pawn—you will at least have earned the right to tell me that you should prize such an avowal,' she answered. 'Wait—let me finish! I have shown you my plans freely; I am not a coward; I fear you as little as I do the duke! Fight with me, and we conquer together; fight against me—and trust the foresight of a woman who has held her own so far against foes, against personal inclinations, against

Fate itself—you will go down among the vanquished!'

'Oh, I believe it!' he exclaimed admiringly; she seemed great in his eyes. 'Together—ah, together!'

'Then, till victory comes, you speak no such word as you have done to-day,' she said steadily; 'if you do, you will never enter my doors again—I swear it! The duke himself would tell you that in a case of this kind I never break my word.'

She moved towards a door which led into her dressing-room, looking back at him over her shoulder.

'Ah, don't go!' he cried eagerly; 'don't!'

'*A rivederci—a domani!*' she answered; waved her hand with the slow, sad smile which sometimes gave a certain pathetic expression to her rather stern face, and passed out of his sight.

The Greek stood for a few seconds lost in thought.

'Da Rimini is an idiot—a beggarly twenty thousand, indeed! What a woman—she would beat the devil himself!'

And he went his way.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE STUDIO.

Mary Danvers began her labours in the old sculptor's studio with the delight of a person who has found the work which is most congenial, and her success equalled her enthusiastic industry. But she was too sensible and too conscientious to neglect her promise to Violet of not allowing the occupation to prevent her attending to other duties. She studied Italian under a good master, and made rapid progress; she was already well grounded in French, lacking only the facility in conversation which is a matter of practice, and which she soon attained through the opportunities afforded her. She found time to read a great deal also, though obliged to put by poetry and romances in a measure, and this at her age appeared a little hard.

'Never mind,' she said to Violet; 'when

one has a good solid dinner every day, it would be silly to grumble because the sweets are sometimes left out—would it not?'

Violet smiled at the homely illustration, but approved of the resolve, and not only the liking for her cousin, but respect for her talents, increased daily. Even Miss Bronson applauded the girl's industry; she had only one reason for dissatisfaction—Mary grudged the hours spent over the pianoforte, and at last rebelled in her quiet fashion.

'If I meant to make music a profession,' she said, 'it would be another thing, but I shall never become more than a very mediocre player.'

'Don't tell me you do not love music!' sighed Miss Bronson.

'I think it is because I do love it that I am discouraged by my own performance,' returned Mary; and she appealed to Violet.

Only that day Mr. Vaughton had come to the house full of enthusiasm about his pupil; he pronounced her a genius, and vowed that anybody who tried to hinder her devoting herself to sculpture would be doing a wicked thing, and sacrifice not only her talents but her happiness.

The professor had been allowed to study

her efforts with his severely-critical eyes, and he came too, and added his verdict to that of Mr. Vaughton.

Violet was in ecstasies, and Miss Bronson reduced to silence by these proofs of the demure little maiden's having chosen the work really fitted to employ all her powers.

So Mary was allowed to toil as assiduously as she pleased, and soon went regularly each morning to the studio. One only needed to look at her changed face to see that she was happy; and now that her shyness had worn off, her manners were full of charm. Violet found her a most agreeable companion; and Mary, completely won by the sympathy and appreciation she met, knew no bounds in her love and admiration for her beautiful cousin.

Visions of a future filled with successful achievements began to haunt the girl; but a dream brighter than that of fame gilded her path, though as yet she did not recognise its potency, even while it permeated every thought, and made the crowning brightness of her way.

It commenced with her meeting Gilbert Warner at his relative's house in New York. Then followed the voyage, during which the weather remained so glorious that one almost

forgot it was not Indian summer still. Some accident occurred to shaft or wheel—not serious enough to cause alarm among the passengers—only a lucky misfortune, which prolonged those charmed days to twice their allotted number; from first to last a voyage in a fairy barque across an enchanted sea, with the marvellous Old World of history and tradition awaiting beyond its golden haze. The dream continued: the journey up to London was no prosaic railway travel to those young pilgrims; the land looked like a garden even in its winter dress; in the background, towns, towers, castles, starting up in rapid succession, whose very names were words of romance, and the objects themselves seemed to rise out of the depths of the storied past and fling their shadow as an additional poesy over the beautiful present.

There Warner decreed that his relative must rest, and he said to Mary laughingly:

'One last opportunity to breathe a little freedom—we are still in the air where young ladies are permitted to do that. Once across the Channel, and a prisoner in an Austrian dungeon would not be more closely bound; so let us make use of the respite, and thank the gods therefor.'

And London—sombre, denuded, at which a woman of the world would have shuddered—the Park an empty wild, the Lady's Mile a desert, Kensington Gardens the confines of the globe—but all the same a city of magical delights to Mary.

Oh, the dismal, would-be aristocratic, and therefore so much the more dismal, lodgings—how bright they looked to Mary, though Mrs. Forrester, seeing all objects through another atmosphere, was made sea-sick, according to her own account, by monstrous yellow chairs, hideous stuffed green parrots which served as ornaments, breakfasts of liver and bacon, and a fiendish, red-faced landlady, who chanted as a daily litany the self-same bit of personal biography without ever pausing for breath:

'Which, if you'll h'excuse me, except h'out of the season, mum, as I've scarce 'ad (mean-no disrespect to furreners) h'anybody under a barrow-knight and 'is lady since I put up my name on the door-plate Mrs. 'Arriet 'Amilton Howens which it is Welsh as it ought to be for 'e was from Wales and traced back by a geology as long as a queen's train to Hadam *and* Heve if not further, and hoh, its my constance prayer that where 'e be among

the seraphim a playing the 'arp with 'is wings that perwented 'e is from a moral sense of what's befalling 'is inconsolable relict which by her this memorium was erected from his tombstone in 'Ammersmith cemetery as 'e may read who paces its solemn depths and well for us hall, mum, if we did more frequent and thereby realised our latter hends and its consequences!'

Then the trip across the Channel, away up the Scheldt, Warner having assured his relative that it was safer far to take that route than trust to the cockle-shells which perilled people's lives between England and France. Then Antwerp, with its old cathedral, its pictures; then a vision of Ghent—of the town where they stood in the square and recited, 'In the market-place of Bruges stands a belfry old and brown;' then a rest in Brussels—the dream waxing brighter and brighter as it neared its close. Then a sudden break—the weariness of travel—the common earth again—for the two had parted.

But the knowledge that they should meet soon, and his arrival in Florence so short a time after her own, prevented Mary's learning her secret through the discipline of waiting and unrest.

Man-like, Gilbert Warner had been less reticent with his heart; he knew that he loved this fair girl, with eyes clear and pure as a woodland brook, with her odd compound of shyness and courage, common-sense so strong that sometimes, to a careless observer, it became too practical, gleams of genius breaking through her talk and shining from her countenance in moments of emotion strong enough to make her forget timidity, or in the society of those with whom she was sufficiently in unison to let her real self appear.

Like many artists, Warner was disinclined to general society, but he proved a frequent and welcome visitor at Violet Cameron's house, and became almost as great a favourite with the professor as was Laurence Aylmer. The shrewd old German found keen interest in watching the romances he perceived in progress about him, seeing more clearly the real state of affairs than the actors themselves; but, save for that warning to Laurence, he kept his own counsel, confident that any little mistakes would gradually be set right, since they were all honest and true.

The hour came when Mary's little spasms of embarrassment in Aylmer's presence—her

avoidance of him at one time, her evident pleasure in his society at another—struck Warner as forcibly as those signs appealed to Miss Cameron, and gave him food for troubled thought in his solitude; but the first opportunity for a pleasant talk with the girl always caused him to forget his fears, and to settle back upon the conviction that Aylmer had neither eyes nor ears except for Violet Cameron, and that Mary knew it.

One evening when Warner was dining at the house, Violet chanced to express a wish that she had a good portrait of her cousin, *à propos* to her disapproval of some proofs of a photograph for which Mary had sat. She had the style of face which photography always maligns; it reproduced her as a serious, washed-out looking little damsel, hardening the physical contours, and utterly refusing to give a glimpse of the expression which rendered her more than pretty.

The very next day Warner took advantage of this wish to give himself a great pleasure. That girlish countenance, so full of beautiful possibilities, haunted him as he sat at the easel, busy with his historical picture, often to the exclusion of the group of martial figures growing into life upon the canvas.

He had been for some time thinking that if he could only paint the face, he might be able to work more easily; at present his longing to do so hindered him sadly. While tracing the bronzed lineaments of one of his heroic Gauls, that idea of painting her would grow so strong, that not unseldom he found himself putting Mary's pensive smile on the bearded lips, or softening the stern glance of the eyes with the dreamy expression which beautified hers.

Here was an opportunity not to be wasted; considering the reason he had to give, she could hardly refuse; so he went into Mary's room to try his powers of persuasion. The house stood on a corner, and the entrance to the sculptor's quarters was in a different street from Warner's, but a long passage connected his studio with the chamber assigned to Mary, on one side of which was the sculptor's atelier, on the other his living apartments. A door led into a salon where Miss Vaughton habitually spent her mornings, and, to satisfy Eliza Bronson's scruples, it had been agreed that this door was always to be left open during Mary's working hours.

'Does she think those plaster-casts Mr. Vaughton means to leave in my possession

will contaminate me ?' she said laughingly to Violet. 'I am not likely to have any visitors except herself and you.'

Mary had not taken Warner's propinquity into consideration ; but on that very account his coming in and out could hardly fall under the head of visits, was the way she settled the matter later in her mind, when his appearance on one pretext or another proved a daily occurrence.

So this morning Warner tapped at the corridor door, and was bidden to enter by a voice which fluttered a little in unison with Mary's heart—that familiar knock always set it beating more rapidly.

The chamber was picturesque enough ; Violet had insisted upon fitting it up according to her own ideas, and when finished, Mary was rather horrified at the thought of what all its elegance must have cost.

The walls were hung with tapestry ; the casts artistically arranged ; here and there stood easels supporting pictures ; near the fireplace was spread a great Turkey carpet. There were carved chairs and couches covered with rich Eastern stuffs, marvellous cabinets filled with choice curiosities, books and ornaments in profusion, but everything in keeping

with the purpose for which the room was meant.

'It is too fine,' said Mary.

'You could not work any more easily in a den,' returned Violet.

'It is beautiful!' cried Mary. 'I used to dream of one day having a wonderful studio, but I couldn't even imagine anything so perfect as this! Oh! you spoil me; you make me walk on velvet; I shall grow too lazy and self-indulgent to be as industrious as I ought!'

But Violet had begun to read her character too well to have any such fears, and Mary soon discovered that her picturesque surroundings were a help rather than a hindrance.

Warner entered, and, after they had exchanged salutations, seated himself, and Mary continued her modelling; it was a part of their bargain that his 'dropping in' should never be allowed to interrupt her work. While they talked he sat and watched her with the mingled admiration of a lover and an artist, for she never looked prettier than in the grey costumes, made according to Violet's fancy, which she wore here instead of her ordinary sombre black.

'I couldn't sit for a likeness,' Mary declared,

when he had led the conversation up to the matter which filled his mind. 'I have a horror of it—portraits always look so stiff, and mine would look stiffer than anybody else's!'

'Now that is casting a doubt on my capacities,' said he.

'Oh, you know what I meant!'

'It would please your cousin so much,' he continued. 'We would keep it a secret, and surprise her with the picture.'

'But I should lose so much time,' urged Mary.

'Come, you shall neither be forced to pose nor lose your time,' continued he. 'I will make a study of the room and you at work. Ah, do consent! remember how delighted Miss Cameron will be.'

I doubt if the artful wretch ever meant the painting to go out of his own possession, but Mary could not know this, and it seemed ill-natured to refuse his request, especially as it was intended as a means of gratifying Violet. Then Warner appealed to Miss Vaughton—a difficult and noisy undertaking, owing to her excessive deafness. For some time she thought he was telling her that Mary proposed to enter a nunnery, a mistake caused

by the excitement of just having heard that an acquaintance had embraced Roman Catholicism and immured herself within the walls of a French convent; and she pleaded piteously with Miss Danvers not to follow so shocking an example.

However, when Warner, after shouting until nearly breathless, at length succeeded in making her understand what he was talking about, she highly approved; so did her brother, who entered while the matter was under discussion, and his verdict settled the business.

Warner rushed off in search of the canvas, which he had provided in advance, brought an easel and colour-box, and set to work at once. His rapidity of execution made him the envy of his fellow-painters, but his progress with this picture was very slow indeed, and he insisted on copying the hangings and adornments of the room with pre-Raphaelite fidelity.

So the days floated on, and the sweet idyl of youth and love grew in beauty and interest; though there would be nothing new in its details, if translated into words, bright and fresh as it seemed to those young hearts.

He uttered no open avowal—the time had

not come for that. Had Miss Vaughton been less deaf than she was, her presence would have proved no restraint. But the poem of their lives went on, each additional page a sweeter melody, until that mediæval room became a fairy haunt, lifted so far above the common world that no echo of its fret and din could reach the pair in their enchanted quiet.

CHAPTER IX.

LIKE JONAH'S GOURD.

Giulia da Rimini had long since perceived that Miss Cameron's neglect of her visits sprang from a settled resolution to limit their intercourse to the most distant terms, but she appeared unconscious of the slight, and never failed to greet Violet with affectionate fervour when they met at the houses of mutual acquaintances.

Even during her previous stay in Florence, Miss Cameron, disliking the woman from the first, had never done more than leave an occasional card or an invitation when she gave a general party; but certain that this season not even so much attention would be accorded, before Violet had announced her day for receiving, Giulia adroitly found it out from Nina and adopted the same, and as Violet gave no balls or other large entertain-

ments this winter, outside of her little knot of special friends nobody's attention was drawn to the fact that any change had taken place in her relations with the duchess.

'Nevertheless, Violet Cameron will have to pay for that supper,' Lady Harcourt said one day to Nina and Sabakine.

'I hope the fair Giulia may try to make her,' returned the prince. 'For I have an idea the American will outgeneral her completely.'

Lady Harcourt shook her head.

'Good gracious!' cried Nina, 'you don't mean to say you think Giulia as clever a woman as Violet? She is crafty enough——'

'Ah,' interrupted her ladyship, 'you have hit on the very word! Violet Cameron is as honest and truthful as the light—that is just where Giulia will gain the advantage.'

'For once in her life she would be puzzled to find out a way of doing any harm,' said Sabakine; 'Miss Cameron is above the reach of her malice—common mortals are not.'

'And since she is, we do not need to render ourselves unhappy,' rejoined Lady Harcourt, calmly.

'Violet would never forgive any of us for venturing to think solicitude necessary,' said Nina.

'No doubt of that,' replied Lady Harcourt, 'so we should be saved the exertion in any case. Well, well, it is none of our affair; one may like Miss Cameron and adore Giulia, still we can't force them to rush into each other's arms.'

'That would be as unexciting to Giulia as kissing a pane of glass,' said Nina gaily, and took her departure.

'She is quite ready to regard Giulia as harmless now that Carlo is safe out of her clutches,' said Lady Harcourt.

'I am afraid she makes her exultation and security a little too palpable to Giulia,' returned Sabakine. 'The ides of March are not over!'

His words were more significant than he knew. At the time Giulia established her confidential relations with the Greek, she entirely changed her tactics towards Carlo. She had on several occasions worried him with scenes—tender, jealous, upbraiding—but neither exhibition had any effect except to make him avoid her because he objected to having his indolent comfort disturbed.

Had she continued those persecutions, he would speedily have hated her ; but when her behaviour convinced him that she meant to submit with a good grace to the inevitable, he was ready to be on pleasant terms, and rather admired the tact with which she accepted the position. Their gambling propensities formed a bond between them, and for some time after their intercourse had been relegated to that of familiar acquaintanceship, Carlo's luck at cards took a favourable turn which inspired him with a feeling of general benevolence in which Giulia had a lion's share, from the fact that on several occasions when they played against each other, she was a considerable loser.

At last, one night at the club when he had suggested *écarté* to the Greek, that worthy regretted his inability to remain ; he had promised to join Gherardi and a few others at the duchess's house to indulge in a little 'poker,' which had become a favourite game with them all, and into which the Greek carried the benefit of his Californian experiences.

'Why not come too ?' Dimetri asked. 'It is just an impromptu affair ; we happened to meet her this morning at the Skating Rink ; she said then if you had been there she

would have asked you to join us. You had better go than stop moping here.'

Having nothing to do until midnight, when he was to meet his wife at Potaski's, Carlo went to the duchess's, and found 'poker' so attractive that on Giulia's proposing a similar party a few evenings afterwards, he consented without hesitation.

'I thought you meant to quarrel with me,' said she.

'I am sure you could not have thought that,' he replied. 'Quarrel with you, duchess? As well expect a man to quarrel with the light—the sun—any beautiful thing, the sight of which is necessary for happiness!'

'It would be very silly in both of us,' she said, with her frankest smile. 'Nothing forms so sure a bond of friendship as a little sentimental folly of which two people are cured—it is odd that one could not go back if one tried!'

'Now that is very uncomplimentary!'

'Nonsense, Carlo; you know what I mean! Come, we are to be good comrades; yes, and help each other if either should want help. Only don't be stand-offish—nothing would be so certain to make people gossip, after our long friendship.'

'I never dreamed of being so,' said he, a little nettled at finding that her cure was as effectual as his own, even while he secretly applauded her wisdom, and rejoiced that she did not mean to make cards a bore in her society.

'Oh, I know very well whose work it was,' returned Giulia, with stately pleasantry. 'My dear Carlo, I shall be charmed to see you soften the American icicle; but surely, even if Miss Cameron is too virtuous to play herself, she need not grudge you a little relaxation.'

Carlo laughed, but he knew that any disclaimers would be wasted; nobody was better aware than Giulia that he would as soon have thought of flirting with a sister as with Miss Cameron, but he reflected that if he vexed her too far, refused to game at her house, she might invent reports which would disturb Violet, and he was too well acquainted with Florence to forget that the more improbable the slander, the more readily it would find credence.

So he quite put his going down to a care for Miss Cameron's reputation, and really felt very virtuous in being able to shield the gratification of his master-passion under such fine motives—they would give an unanswerable reason also to Nina, if she dis-

covered that he had been drawn back to the enchantress's bower. She would consider it better for him to risk losing a little money to Giulia than, by breaking with her completely, rouse her anger to such a pitch that she would revenge herself by scandals against Miss Cameron, well knowing that she could hardly choose any form of retaliation so painful to both husband and wife.

The duchess belonged to the order of schemers which, though capable of inventing plots on a grand scale and possessing the generalship to carry them out, is petty and crafty enough never to neglect the smallest cunning device which can prove of personal use or the means of annoying another.

One rainy day three or four ladies and as many gentlemen were killing time by playing baccarat in her salon—old Mademoiselle de Roquefort forced to sit by and act as duenna; not that her presence checked either the betting or the reckless conversation to which, accustomed as she was, her unfortunate conscience could never grow indifferent, but a duenna Giulia must have—it was almost her sole sacrifice to appearances, and poor mademoiselle's sufferings rendered it a pleasure too.

Somebody mentioned Miss Cameron's name, and it struck the duchess this was a favourable opportunity for making it appear that she and the lady were on visiting terms. She had taken several cards of Violet's out of the baskets in the salons of mutual acquaintances; a couple of the purloined bits of pasteboard lay among those left by her own visitors, and she possessed another which she had devoted to a special purpose.

She quitted the room on some pretext, I got the card and gave it to her footman, ordering him presently to enter and present it as if Miss Cameron were waiting below.

'It is just to play a joke on Signor Gherardi,' she said; 'be sure you are very serious, and do your part naturally. Wait twenty minutes or so, and then come in.'

Before the time had elapsed, Lady Harcourt was announced. The duchess would rather not have had a person so intimate with Miss Cameron a witness of the manœuvre, but she reflected that it was very doubtful if her ladyship would pay sufficient attention to the matter ever to mention it to the American, and in case she did, a denial on the creature's part of having come to the

Palazzo Rimini would appear a palpable fib.

Any way it was too late to countermand her order; the new-comer had scarcely got seated before the footman appeared. Giulia, occupied in dealing the hands, said aloud, as the man presented the card:

'Who is it, Alessandro?'

Gherardi sat next her; he unceremoniously leaned over and read out the name before the servant could speak:

'Miss Cameron!'

'Oh, good heavens!' exclaimed the duchess; 'what will she think to find us playing cards at this unholy hour—and the room is blue with tobacco smoke!'

'We shall all be ruined in her estimation,' laughed Gherardi.

'Oh, you may laugh, but I am really afraid—she is so strict!' cried the duchess. 'What shall I do, Lady Harcourt?'

'Let her come up, by all means,' replied her ladyship, calmly. She looked the picture of indifference, but all the same she was watching. Giulia's agitation struck her as a well done bit of comedy, played for some secret purpose.

'I would not,' added one of the other ladies

—a countrywoman of Miss Cameron's, to whom baccarat by daylight was a rather stolen amusement. 'What is the good of shocking anybody who has scruples?'

'You are right,' said the duchess, looking relieved. 'Alessandro, did the porter say I was in?'

'He said that he was not certain—he would see, eccellenza,' returned Alessandro, with true Italian readiness.

'Then say you are out!' cried Gherardi; 'gone to vespers.'

They all laughed as if the idea were a capital joke, though in reality the duchess was very regular in her devotions, and Sabakine vowed that when she had a new sin to commit, she always went through a novena to ensure success.

'Will you all promise not to betray me?' she asked. 'Lady Harcourt—Gherardi—all of you?'

'Yes, we promise,' they answered.

'Then bid the porter say I am out—he did not know it—I had gone out through the garden, Alessandro.'

'Gone to vespers, and I went with her,' added Gherardi.

The servant retired, grave as a judge.

'The Anglo-Saxon race has such odd ideas!' cried Giulia. 'No better than us Latins —I beg your pardon, Lady Harcourt, but one never knows what trifle English and Americans may be shocked at.'

'Don't mind me—I have no prejudices,' returned her ladyship.

'I really do admire Miss Cameron so much,' added Giulia.

'I hate her,' said Gherardi, 'because I know her beauty and her money are out of my reach. But even the fair American must not be permitted to interfere with business.'

They resumed their game, and presently Lady Harcourt took her leave. She did not happen to see Violet Cameron until a couple of days afterwards, but she had not forgotten the little episode.

'Have you been at dear Giulia's lately? she asked.

'No,' Violet replied, paused an instant, then added: 'You ask me that just in the hope of teasing! I told you and Nina I had not been at her house this season, or invited her to mine, and had no intention of doing so.'

'I thought perhaps you had changed your mind,' said her ladyship; 'you know I told

you at the time that it is always useless to make an exception of a person whom everybody receives.'

'I dare say it is,' was all the answer Violet returned.

'Now I enjoy dear Giulia's society; I like to watch her manœuvres. Usually they are so deep it is difficult to find them out, and that always interests me.'

'She does not happen to interest me.'

'A pity, a pity,' rejoined Lady Harcourt, laughing, though her voice held a tone of warning. 'But I know you are adamant when once you have made up your mind, so I only say—a pity! Have you seen Bellucci's new picture?'

She entered into a dissertation concerning the merits of the painting, and seemed to forget the duchess as completely as Violet did, but as she was driving home, she said to herself:

'Miss Cameron will certainly have to pay for that supper! Well, I can do nothing! If I talked a month it would only make her more contemptuous of Giulia's power; it is best to leave matters alone. Trying to guard a person against trouble is the surest way to help it forward.'

But she thought often of the matter, and her suspicions that Giulia contemplated mischief grew stronger; though, well informed as she usually kept herself, even her ladyship did not know that as time elapsed these impromptu parties at the duchess's occurred more and more frequently.

At last, without hesitation, Giulia said to the men:

'Why shouldn't we have regular evenings? Come, it shall be a private club! I will furnish the rooms, and you shall divide the expense of wine and seltz and cigars among you—then we shall all be perfectly at our ease.'

In spite of her eagerness to entangle Carlo hopelessly in this new web, the idea of going to any expense weighed on her soul. She could stop even while counting up that ready money of his to regret each glass of punch which she had to pay for, and finally hit on this method, perfectly indifferent as to what any of them might think of her parsimony.

The others applauded her proposal, but Carlo hesitated a little; he was afraid Nina might hear of the matter and suspect that under such excuse he had drifted back to his old intimacy with the duchess, though his

fear did not arise so much from consideration for his wife's feelings as from a dread of her believing him weak enough to be deluded anew.

Giulia read his thoughts easily enough, and determined to render refusal impossible.

'Carlo says nothing,' she cried playfully; 'he has to ask consent!'

'What an idea!' said Gherardi. 'You forget, duchess, that Carlo's matrimonial tie is a garland of flowers, not an iron fetter!'

'I beg your pardon,' returned she, with the grave dignity by which, when she chose, she could control any one of them; 'even in jest I do not like such an insinuation! Nina Magnoletti is the dearest friend I have in the world. Carlo might play cards the week through in this house without scruple on her part.' Then she added, with a relapse into playfulness: 'No, no; the restriction would come from a very different quarter, eh, Carlo?'

Lightly as she spoke, the glance she fastened on him warned the marchese of the direction her anger would take in case he refused, and the eagerness with which his companions called on Giulia to explain,

showed how easy it would be for her to set the ball in motion.

'No influence could count against a wish of yours, duchess; you know that only too well,' said he.

'Bravo!' she cried. 'Then it is a bargain! And we will keep our club a profound secret, else we shall have a crowd—is that agreed?'

They all consented, and this removed Carlo's last scruple, as Giulia had been sure it would do, and no one caught the rapid glance of triumph which she flashed into the Greek's wickedly smiling eyes.

Carlo's increasing infatuation for cards caused Nina a great deal of uneasiness, but he had behaved so well in the affair of the duchess that she feared this winter to attempt any open opposition in regard to his crowning weakness—thankful to compound for a form of amusement which, if it caused pecuniary embarrassments, was at least engrossing enough to spare her the pain of seeing him rush into a fresh flirtation. His good fortune, too, lasted for some time, and he told her of it: so she quieted her fears by trusting that his lucky vein would continue, and as she believed that he usually

played at the club when he had no card-parties at home, she remained quiescent.

'He must amuse himself—he has a right,' she said to Violet; 'and oh, my dear, I'd pawn my diamonds with satisfaction if it were necessary, just to reward him for the pleasure it gives me to see how all Giulia's efforts are wasted.'

For that astute lady did not hesitate in Nina's presence to affect pique when the marchese paid attention to some new lady, and would say to the little wife:

'Carlo runs away from me as if I were the plague! Violet Cameron has made him hate me—ah, don't you let her make you hate me too!'

'She never tries; she could not if she would,' returned Nina, wondering whether Giulia was most piqued at Violet's having betrayed her to Carlo, or at the difficulty she found in winning Laurence Aylmer from his allegiance to his beautiful countrywoman.

But as the weeks went on, though her mind continued at rest as to her husband's cure, she felt less confident in regard to Aylmer's ability to resist the duchess's wiles. Giulia's infatuation only deepened, and her resolve to subdue Laurence waxed

stronger with each fresh proof of the slight progress she was making. She persecuted him a great deal, and the ground on which she stationed herself appealed so keenly to his chivalry that, though he grew more and more impatient and heartily cursed his ill-luck, he could not refuse to listen when she poured her troubles into his ears—inventing marvellous stories, pretending fear of her very life, declaring that she had been warned of a plot to poison her if all other means failed to give the duke his victory, showing letters from a faithful friend in Paris who kept her informed of what her enemies there were doing (letters written according to her own dictation), and playing her part so well that he could not help feeling sorry for her, though his distaste grew into positive aversion.

Nina saw many signs which disturbed her: Lady Harcourt and Sabakine saw them too, and they were all genuinely troubled, for they had set their hearts on Aylmer's winning Miss Cameron.

'I did not think he would be such an idiot,' said Nina; 'I really believed he was a little less weak than the rest of his sex.'

'Oh, my dear, it is just because of his looking superior and poetical,' rejoined Lady Harcourt; 'he is made of the same clay as the others, only the outside stamp is different.'

'He can't get rid of her, that I believe is the truth,' said Sabakine, with a generosity marvellous in one man's judgment of another.

'He shouldn't have put himself in a position where any such effort would have been necessary,' cried Nina.

'Come now, be merciful!' laughed Sabakine. 'There is no male animal in all history whom you women despise as you do Joseph. You can't expect any fellow of this generation to incur your scorn by following his example.'

Nina would have liked to warn Laurence, but her two friends advised her to leave matters alone—interference would only make them worse—and, to her relief, Miss Cameron's persistent seclusion this winter kept her from perceiving Giulia's arts, and no hint of the rumours which began to be whispered about were carried to her ears.

There were other rumours too, which did not reach Nina or Aylmer any more than

they did Violet—that Carlo had transferred his devotion to Miss Cameron; but they were very softly whispered, and even Lady Harcourt and Sabakine failed to trace them to their rightful source—the duchess and her ally the Greek.

Then, as time wore on, Carlo and Aylmer became less intimate. They were perfectly friendly and cordial, but did not see each other so often. The duchess managed that easily enough by letting each know things of the other which caused mutual disapprobation. Aylmer was aware that Carlo played more and more heavily, and lost a great deal, and Carlo wondered that Laurence could foolishly risk his chances with Violet, and felt, in spite of his genuine indifference to Giulia, that vague jealousy a man usually does feel towards his probable successor in a woman's regard, however glad he may be to recover his own freedom.

So the duchess was kept busy, and her excitement continued. Besides all the rest, she had a good deal of difficulty in restraining the Greek's jealousy of Aylmer within bounds, and equal trouble to keep the American from displaying his contempt for

Dimetri; and the days flew on with her, and her loves and her hates grew like Jonah's gourd, though they were deeply rooted and full of vitality as forest trees.

CHAPTER X.

MARY'S RESOLVE.

The bas-reliefs were cast in plaster, and just then the Florentine artists opened an exhibition for the benefit of some charitable scheme.

Mr. Vaughton sent Mary's productions without her knowledge, and they received high encomiums, pleasing a connoisseur so much that he ordered them in marble. Mary's delight at her first commission and her first breath of praise and success, can only be realised by one who has known a similar moment in early youth.

Not only the pleasurable hope of independence—that strongest longing in every noble nature — but those visions of fame which are so dazzling to the young, were Mary's now, and to Violet it was delightful to see and sympathise with her happiness.

One cloud still lingered on Mary's horizon, heavy enough sorely to dim its brightness: she could not feel at ease in Laurence Aylmer's society, and the recollections from which this discomfort arose sorely troubled her, in spite of her absorbing occupations. About this time—she had now been nearly two months in her new home—she came to a resolution in regard to the matter which weighed so heavily on her mind. She could not endure longer, she must set herself right. The task seemed very hard—bold, unmaidenly almost, she feared—but good heavens! anything would be better than to let this misconstruction remain; to have him think—think —— Oh, even in her solitude Mary shivered, and broke off abruptly in her meditation. She must speak, that she determined upon, and it so happened that the very day after she came to this resolve, an opportunity to carry it into effect was afforded her.

Mr. Vaughton had gone out she knew, and she had been waiting to consult him about certain changes in her work—the bust of a friend which she was making from photographs. After a while she heard some one in the adjoining studio, and supposing that her master had returned, tapped on the

door and opened it without waiting for permission to enter. There stood Laurence Aylmer.

'Good-morning, Miss Danvers,' he said, walking towards her. 'The workmen in the outer rooms told me Mr. Vaughton was not here, but I wanted a peep at the new group, so I came in. May I not see what you are working at too? I have just come from the Exposition, and heard a great deal of praise of your bas-reliefs; they are excellent.

'Pray come in,' she answered, mastering, as best she might, the trouble caused by this unexpectedly speedy granting of her wishes.

'What a *beau idéal* of a studio!' he exclaimed, following her in, and closing the door behind him. 'I have never been permitted to enter it, you remember. Thanks for removing the embargo.'

She felt herself colour as she recollected that once when Violet had spoken in his presence of bringing him, she had received the proposal in silence, and perceiving her cousin look at her in surprise, had murmured an excuse about wanting to wait until her bas-reliefs were finished before she admitted visitors.

She said something of the same sort now,

conscious of saying it very tamely, fancying, too, that a little of her discomposure was reflected in his manner, as she had often in similar moments been tormented by thinking the case.

'What a charming nook it is!' he added quickly.

'My cousin's taste, you might be sure! She is much more genuinely artistic than any artist I know,' said Mary, glad not only to give vent to her enthusiastic admiration of Violet, but to distract his attention from her annoying blushes; and she had decided long since in her own mind that to mention Violet's name was enough to make Laurence Aylmer forget everything else.

'Yes,' was all he said, but Mary saw his eyes wander about the room with a positively caressing expression. She had noticed the same look in them frequently, when, during his visits to the house, he would, thinking himself unobserved, touch some object that belonged to her—a book she had just laid down; a fan or glove thrown carelessly on a table.

'As you are one of her special friends, you shall have her particular seat,' continued Mary, pointing towards a great carved easy-chair that stood on the Turkey carpet.

He turned towards her with a quick smile —she thought an inquiring one. Then he caught sight of old Miss Vaughton, seated just beyond the arched doorway, leaning placidly back, a newspaper on her knee, and her spectacles on her nose; but it needed only a glance to discover that she was sound asleep.

'I won't disturb her by speaking,' he said. 'It would be positively wicked; but, oh, what a negligent duenna!'

'Pray don't tell Miss Bronson, else she will want to come herself,' replied Mary, trying to speak naturally.

'Ah, Miss Bronson would never fall asleep on the post of duty, I am certain,' he said, laughing.

'Never,' said Mary, laughing too, though a little nervously.

'But I think she would let me in,' he continued. 'I flatter myself that she is good enough rather to like me.'

'Oh, she considers you absolutely perfect, I believe,' said Mary. 'She is never tired of chanting your praises to Violet and me.'

'That must be somewhat of a trial to you both.'

'We bear it,' said Mary, with a demurely mischievous manner, at which he smiled.

'We must have crosses in this world,' he replied, exulting in his soul to think that he was often a subject of conversation in Violet's house and presence.

'Yes,' said Mary; and, recollecting the cross which had lain so heavily on her of late, and her determination to get rid of it, no matter how difficult the exertion, she made no further effort to continue that playful badinage.

Aylmer moved forward, and laid his hand on the back of the chair which Mary had called her cousin's; and the girl, partly to give him a moment to himself, partly to find some occupation wherewith to steady her mind, turned to her clay and began moistening it.

Aylmer had come to Vaughton's studio in the hope Violet might be visiting her relative, so that he could enjoy her society for awhile under the pretext of wishing to see Miss Danvers's work. Actually he had not seen her for six-and-thirty hours! He had missed her on the previous night at both receptions where he went; had called at her house a little while before, and been told she was out.

He fully recognised the wisdom of the professor's suggestions, and meant to obey them to the letter; but deprivation of her society he felt would only render his *rôle* more difficult when they did meet. Absence filled his heart so full that to repress its eagerness and appear contented with the friendship she offered must severely try all his powers of endurance.

He was glad now that she and circumstances had combined to force upon him the reticence which he knew the time had not arrived to break; left to himself, he should certainly have broken it, in spite of his determination, and perhaps have ruined his hopes utterly by forcing a decision upon her before her heart had spoken loudly enough to overcome her scruples and what she termed the voice of reason. She did care for him—she must! It could not be that this love which pervaded his whole being by its strength, was utterly without power to move her. She cared—a thousand trifles assured him that she cared! If he continued patient and prudent he should overcome her causes for hesitation and win his prize!

He roused himself to recollect that this was neither the time nor place to indulge

in reverie. He crossed the room, and stood beside Mary—praised the bust, asked questions, examined the photographs—waiting, hoping that she might speak of her cousin again: even to hear Violet's name mentioned by this sweet, pure girl who loved her was a pleasure. And Mary endeavoured to talk quietly, clutching the while at her wits to find courage to begin the subject upon which she wished to converse—reviling her own folly, since such hesitation might lose her this opportune chance.

Miss Vaughton might wake; he might take his leave hastily, as he almost always did if by any hazard he found her alone when he called at Violet's house, and he must not go till she had spoken—he must not! She might have to wait weeks before so favourable an occasion arose again, and she was wasting the time! This reflection nerved her into desperation that tolerably well supplied the place of her ordinary courage, which had so cruelly deserted her.

And he, a little preoccupied—disappointed at not having found Violet—unable to tear himself away without at least learning whether there was a hope of her yet coming, halted in conversation almost as much as

Mary. Then growing conscious that she would find his visit a terrible bore if he could not be a little less dull, he caught at some topic for talk, and unfortunately, as he thought, hit on some reminiscences of the days when he used to be a frequent guest at her father's house.

'It seems a long while ago,' he said, 'still longer when I look at you and see how you have changed.'

He stopped suddenly. How much or how little her father's death had let her into the secrets of his affairs he could not tell, but she did know there had been difficulties between himself and George Danvers, and worse than all, she knew something of the plan the latter at one time conceived in which she was to have a share.

How idiotically stupid to remind her of that season! What might she not think! He glanced at her—she had become scarlet; then before he could remove his gaze she grew deathly pale.

Now she must speak! She had been wondering how she was ever to find words, but the consciousness of having betrayed such agitation rendered her more frantic, and she burst out:

'Mr. Aylmer, there is something I have wanted to say to you ever since I came to Florence—I can never be at ease with you till I have. Maybe it is wrong for a girl to speak——' She broke off, reflected an instant, then, though the colour came back to her cheeks in a torrent, and she trembled in every limb from nervous excitement, she lifted her head proudly, and added in a firm voice: 'No, it cannot be wrong for a girl to set herself right! There is something higher than conventional scruples—womanly dignity.'

'And I never saw a girl with more, or who knew better how to make it respected,' he said gently, though he looked a little uncomfortable.

'I thank you,' Mary answered. 'I know you are honest and good—you will not misunderstand me. Wait, please; if I don't say it quickly I shan't be able to say it at all.'

She pressed her hand hard against her heart, trembling more violently, but her tones were firm still as she went on:

'I know what my father once talked to you about. During his illness he told me. Oh, he thought at one time that a—a marriage between you and me would be possible

—that—that- — — Oh, I can't tell you how it has humiliated me to think you might suppose I had—had cared for you! And when we meet now it is always in my mind. Then I act so silly that I am afraid other people might notice—and—and—oh, it drives me almost wild sometimes! I can't endure it—I can't have you think I ever felt so much as the ghost of a girlish fancy for you! Oh, I never dreamed of such a thing, any more than you dreamed of considering me a grown woman!'

'I am sure of it, Miss Danvers,' he answered. 'When your father honoured me by suggesting that such an alliance would not be displeasing to him, he assured me that he had not spoken to you—that he did not know if you could entertain the idea.'

'You are very good to try and spare me,' she said, 'but papa told me everything when he was ill. Oh, Mr. Aylmer, I am sure that for months and months before, his head was affected by that dreadful disease which killed him! Oh, it was that made him commit so many mistakes in business; and he lost other people's money as well as his own, and they thought he was wicked.'

'It is very probable he suffered as you say,'

Aylmer replied. 'But indeed, Miss Mary, it is useless to think of those things!'

'Yes,' she sighed, 'useless. I cannot right these losses. Oh, if the time should ever come! But I can set myself right! I do beg you to understand! Why, I couldn't have dreamed of marrying you, if you had been the only man in the world—oh, I did not think how that sounded! Please, please don't call me rude—I like you very much—I know how clever and good you are—oh, I am only making it all worse!'

'Indeed you are not,' he said, with a smile—so composed that he quieted her. 'I am sure your very strong asseveration was not meant to be uncomplimentary. Believe me, I perfectly appreciate your motive in speaking; if you were uncomfortable, we could never get on easy, friendly terms—and I hope you mean to let me count myself among your friends, Miss Mary.'

'Indeed, I shall be very proud if I may!' she cried; and tears rose in her eyes, but they were signs of relief, not trouble. She had got a great weight off her mind. He believed her, and received her abrupt revelation with such perfect tact, that her embarrassment vanished.

'Good, firm friends,' he went on, 'and ready to congratulate one another when each finds that heart and love which is said to await every human being somewhere—sometime!'

His smile grew soft and dreamy. Ah, he had found the realisation of his ideal—Mary knew that! She sat down on the sofa, and he placed himself beside her. She looked up at him with a sigh of relief, saying:

'I am so glad I have spoken—I wish I had done so before! I wanted to tell my cousin—to tell Violet. But it all seemed so silly—it was so difficult to explain to anybody; and I was afraid if I tried, and worked myself into one of my excitements, I should only make it look as if I had—had cared.'

'But now you have spoken, and are at rest,' he said. 'Believe me, I never had—could not have—any thought of you derogatory to your dignity in any respect.'

'Ah, but when you saw me behave so foolishly as I did!' cried Mary. 'I acted very often as if I was frightened—sometimes I talked rubbish, just out of bravado! Plenty of men would have been stupid enough to think I cared. Oh, I thank you a thousand times!'

'It is for me to thank you for your good

opinion,' he said, with another kindly smile. 'And now that everything is cleared up, you will be quite at ease with me, and begin to look on me as a friend?'

'Yes, indeed! And, oh, Mr. Aylmer—I know you lost money through papa—try not to blame him! You wouldn't think he cheated! Why, a bad man would have managed to save his own money—and he lost all his.'

'Since I entered into speculations voluntarily, it is myself that I must blame, Miss Mary.'

He could say that, but he could say no more. Danvers had certainly deceived him egregiously. He often wondered if, at the time the man sounded the ground to see whether a marriage between Aylmer and his daughter might be possible, he meant in that case to spare his friend's fortune. But even if he had, he could not have done it—his mania for speculation would have carried him away.

At this moment some one in Mr. Vaughton's studio knocked for admittance, and before Mary could answer, the door opened, Violet Cameron appeared on the threshold, and just behind her stood Warner.

The pair seated on the sofa rose quickly, but the intruders both took in the tableau

which their entrance disturbed—Aylmer bending over Mary, she looking eagerly up into his face ; beyond the arched doorway on the other side of the room good Miss Vaughton tranquilly reposing in her arm-chair, dreaming, doubtless, of far different things than those duties of chaperonage which Eliza Bronson had endeavoured to impress upon her mind.

Mary hurried forward, and Aylmer followed ; for a few moments they all stood and talked together, but Violet was the only one of the four who seemed at ease—Violet calm, gracious, smiling, and all the while with a sensation at her heart as if a hand of ice had suddenly been laid upon it, chilling its pulses with a mortal coldness. The interview was torture to Warner. His jealous suspicions, so long combated, so often thrust aside, surged up in an angry storm which he feared face and voice must betray, and he took his departure so abruptly that poor Mary's agitation increased, though she did not assign his displeasure to its rightful cause.

CHAPTER XI.

'THE END OF OUR ROMANCE.'

TEN days elapsed — the most restless and miserable Violet Cameron had ever endured.

I have said little in reference to her feelings towards Laurence Aylmer as the winter went on, because it seemed wiser to set the record all down together in the place where it rightfully belongs—the time when Violet forced her unwilling soul to admit the truth —clearly, openly—without pity for its shame, without mercy for her aching heart.

She loved Laurence Aylmer. The attempt to shelter the feeling under the guise of a fancy had speedily proved unavailing, from the fact that reason told her fancies did not belong to her years. Then for a season she called the sentiment which engrossed her by the easy name of sympathy. He was so superior to the ordinary men who hovered about her, so much more elevated in intellect

and refined in tastes, with aspirations and ambitions of which they were as incapable as butterflies of singing like nightingales. His enthusiasm and perseverance, his determination to carry out his aspirations, to make his life a real life : all these things had attracted her towards him, helped to forge the tie between them.

Weak as her other pretence had been ! She loved this man—loved him with the poetical fervour which destiny had prevented her youth from developing—loved him with the strength of her womanhood; and those girlish dreams which had found no object whereon to spend their riches, which she had thought worn out, lived beyond, rose from their quiescence, eager, importunate, and cast their glow across the secret of her maturity.

She loved him ! Useless to argue, to say that she did not even know him well : heart and soul gave her the lie, smiled triumphant over common-sense and entrenched themselves in that overwhelming assertion. And this strong love which had come to her out of season, belated—like a flower blooming after the first frosts of autumn—must be crushed, though she trampled her heart into atoms in order to effect its destruction.

Since that certainty of Mary's affection had forced itself upon her, Violet had held many a bitter, savage communion with that rebellious heart which insisted so wildly upon possessing its happiness. Was she to let a girl's dream—such a weak thing at best—stand between her and the fulness of bliss? And from their first moment of meeting, this man had loved her—her—Violet! And the very force with which her heart uttered that assurance brought a reaction. Say that he loved her—more, admit that she was beautiful enough to win any man's love—what then? Why this: her factitious semblance of youth, already unduly prolonged, might fade any day; the least mischance—a passing illness, a sudden trouble—might bring the wrinkles into her forehead, the grey into her hair; worse still, might freeze and kill the freshness of thought which had kept her soul young, and that soul, worn and tired, reflect its weariness in her features, and help more speedily to obliterate the last trace of beauty which had brought men to her feet.

If she were to marry him and then the change should come, after just months enough of perfect happiness to render life unendurable if she were forced to accept any portion of bliss

which could be counted, having known happiness in its unmeasurable fulness!

Such a season often came into the lives of women who married men older than themselves, but under those circumstances the sufferer could have the relief of feeling that she and her husband were growing elderly together.

But this love which beset her—Violet! If she were to marry this man towards whom her heart had gone out, she must see herself age—see the lines come in her face, the grey into her hair—while he, as a man, had claims to youth still; live perhaps to hear the world wonder what could have induced him to such sacrifice—oh, worse yet, live to know that he wondered himself. And if he were noble enough to remain true, that would make matters worse for him; each time girlish charms attracted his eye he would have to check the bitter reflection that if he had only waited, only resisted a fancy, he might now in his prime have taken that loveliness to his breast, have prolonged his own youth by its possession; whereas, through his folly, he had rendered such happiness impossible. He was tied—bound—chained—married—to the worn, wrinkled,

middle-aged woman whose face hung like a ghost between him and the sun!

No, better to give him up of her own free will than live to endure such misery; forced absolutely to pity him, to curse her own idiotcy, as perhaps he would be too generous to do, and so, through sympathy with his pain, bear his burthen in addition to her own. Better give him up, teach him gradually to content himself with friendship; ay, be the one to show him that in Mary he would find peace and rest for both present and future.

And now it seemed that she had indeed acted her part well: she had convinced him that he could hope only for her esteem. Had he, without aid or counsel from her, turned for consolation towards Mary? Had he recognised, as Violet believed she had done, indisputable signs, unwittingly betrayed, that the girl had crowned him the hero of her dreams, and been flattered and touched thereby into rapid recognition of the truth that his fancy for the elder cousin was a delusion; that here stood the realisation of his ideal?

It looked so, Violet thought, as she recalled that scene in the studio. She went back over the events of the past week. Why, since Mary Danvers's arrival, she had never

once found it difficult, even in their *tête-à-têtes*, to keep the conversation from the perilous ground to which several times before he had led it forward! More and more patiently he had accepted the terms on which she had told him their intercourse must remain—friendship.

And, during these last ten days, Mary's manner to him had undergone a complete change: she was never shy in his presence now, never unnaturally gay one moment, and moody, sometimes almost abrupt, at another; she showed her pleasure at his visits, and frankly took her share of his society. Ah, she had gone beyond the region of doubts and fears; she was lulled into security so sweet that no reflection came; a repose where she just floated passively on. Violet knew! During that period at the villa, after his illness, had it not been the same for a little while with herself? But what a triple fool she was to compare her idyl to Mary's! Mary a girl, with a right to dream—and she an elderly woman—oh, an old maid, who might almost have been a grandmother to-day, if fate had allowed her to love and marry as early as most American girls.

Wanted to cry, did she? Well, there

should be no exhibition of lachrymose weakness—she had borne enough from her own folly—there should be an end! And Violet shook her clenched hand anew at the image in the mirror. It had grown her habit to hold bitter monologues before her glass, and now on this tenth night, which completed that round of useless misery, she had come home from a ball additionally angered with herself because aware that she had tried to forget trouble in the pleasure of Aylmer's society.

'You look as if you were painted,' she informed the image. 'As for your eyes—they are disgraceful! But you are just as much a pretence—a ludicrous, ridiculous pretence—as old Mrs. Sinclair, with her dyed hair and her made-up brows. Keep me fretting in this way, and I'll very soon show you yourself as wrinkled and yellow as she would be if somebody rubbed off the red and white—you caricature of youth, you sort of original mummy that has had colour left in it by some wonderful nowaday forgotten process!'

She laughed aloud, but I think a burst of tears would have followed that tirade against the satin-robed, jewel-crowned reflection, had she not been roused by Mary's voice calling:

'I hear you; may I come in? I have been awake ever so long, but was afraid to disturb you; since you are laughing, let me come and laugh too.'

In sixty seconds by the clock, Violet Cameron went through every imaginable phase of emotion, from a longing to mutilate her own face till its mocking beauty should no longer torture her by its arrogant assertion against the years, to an insane desire to open the door suddenly, spring on the girl waiting beyond, and do her some deadly harm then and there!

The very madness, the positive imbecility of her fancies, brought her back to reason, as it does the rest of us in similar crazed moments, else the chronicle of crime would increase until scores upon scores of additional daily sheets were all too few to contain the list.

'Come in, you naughty girl,' said Violet, softly; and Mary appeared upon the threshold, looking like a nymph or a dryad in her long white gown, with her wavy hair veiling her shoulders. 'What do you mean by being awake at this hour? I would scold, only you look so pretty I've not the heart.'

'How the light hurts my eyes!' cried

Mary, holding up both hands to protect them. 'And, oh, how beautiful *you* are! You must be like Mary Stuart or Semiramis——'

'Or Helen of Troy, or some other bad woman whom you've no business to have heard of,' interrupted Violet. 'I wonder when people want to find comparisons for me, why they always choose the most dreadful women in all history?'

She was thinking of that night in the autumn—oh, how far off it appeared; how the reflection of its moonlight seemed to scorch her brain, soft as it had appeared then; how every sight and sound repeated itself in a flash, with all its sweetness turned to pain!—that night on the terrace of the Magnoletti villa, when she had laughed at Aylmer's unfortunate comparisons—laughed without any bitterness, sore and angry as the recollection made her now.

'I don't believe they were bad,' cried Mary; 'other women invented the stories out of jealousy! Oh, the light and the dazzle of your diamonds—and you still more—quite blind me!'

'Go back into your room, and I'll come as soon as I have got out of this impossible

gown; oh dear, I can't unfasten it, and Clarice has gone to bed.'

'See what a famous waiting-maid I make,' said Mary; 'only come into my chamber—I can't bear this light. I will take in a dressing-gown—here is one! What pretty *robes-de-chambre* you always have—don't say I'm not beginning to talk French—only it must be sinful to spend so much money on a thing just to wrap round one!'

'Bless me, mouse, whatever is the matter with you?' asked Violet. 'You are usually the most demure of mice, and here you are chattering as fast as a monkey.'

'I don't know why,' said Mary; 'I was gloomy enough a little while ago, though I couldn't have given any reason for that mood. I can for my present elated one—it is you and your beauty.'

By this time they were in Mary's room, and Violet seated in a low chair near the window, while her cousin unlaced her dress.

'Do you never feel sad?' continued Mary. 'I have often thought your high spirits must just be for society, but when I heard you laughing so heartily in there all by yourself, I knew I had been mistaken. To be sure,

you may well laugh—you have everything in the world.'

'Don't envy me my "everything" too much,' replied Violet, recollecting what had caused her laughter.

'Envy you—no—I hope I am not capable of that! Though, after all, I don't know! I am forever finding out I am so much more wicked than I dreamed possible,' sighed Mary.

'I am afraid that is what very often happens to most of us,' returned Violet, recalling the insane impulses which had flitted through her mind when Mary's sweet young voice roused her from her bitter reverie.

Mary sighed again so dolefully that Violet, remembering how at her age one is given to exaggerate any wrong thought till in one's penitence it almost assumes the proportions of a crime, added:

'Don't groan as if you had a murder on your soul, my dear! Bad thoughts may come without any fault of ours—all we have to do is not to act upon them. I remember reading a saying of an eccentric Wesleyan preacher who lived early in the century in America—Lorenzo Dow—that I have always considered

very expressive: "We can't hinder the birds flying over our heads, but we can keep them from building nests in our hair."'

'Oh, I must recollect that—it is excellent,' said Mary.

'Is it not? Fancy, I repeated it once to my dear old Miss Bronson, and she begged me never to quote it again, for it sounded really vulgar.'

'I suppose if a bishop had made the remark she would have called it sublime,' said Mary.

'You have hit the truth exactly,' returned Violet. 'Really, mouse, you are such a quiet little thing that you often quite startle me by the way you read people's characters.'

'I didn't know I could,' said Mary. 'Anyway, you needn't be afraid of having yours read

I wish somebody could make me understand it,' replied Violet. 'I don't suppose it amounts to much, but it puzzles me more every day I live. Dear me, small one, it is a great comfort to talk to you. One doesn't have to dot every *i* and cross every *t*—you comprehend at half a word.'

'I'm so glad you like me!' exclaimed Mary, sitting down on a footstool at Violet's feet,

and leaning her head against her cousin's knee. The shutters were open; the moon cast a soft radiance through the chamber—heightened Violet's beauty into a mysterious splendour and turned Mary's thick-falling hair to dusky gold.

'You look like a Sibyl!' cried the girl, gazing up at her cousin with the admiration it is so pretty to see one woman bestow upon another.

'And I think I must have you painted as Una,' returned Violet, gaily. 'And now that we have finished our mutual compliments, tell me what was the reason you lay awake into the small hours, instead of being fast asleep like a sage damsel?'

'No reason, unless because I was goose enough to drink tea after dinner—that always keeps me awake.'

'Oh, you practical little wretch!' cried Violet. 'I thought the moonlight would inspire you with some poetical confession.'

'I haven't any to make—girls ought not to have,' said Mary, with a dash after the primness wherewith she had a habit of hedging herself in.

'Oh, my dear, if one did only what one

ought!' replied Violet. 'Well, at least tell me what you were thinking about.'

It might be a long while before another opportunity to get at her young relative's thoughts and feelings would offer so favourable as this. Violet wanted to do it—not to force the girl into any avowals which later she might regret, but to crush her own folly with proofs uncontrovertible; and the very fact that something within her shrank from the work rendered Violet the more determined.

'Thinking? All sorts of things, or dreaming rather, I suppose,' said Mary. Then she was silent for a little. Suddenly she moved her head impatiently to and fro on Violet's knee, and continued, in a slow, reflective tone, oddly at variance with her restless movement: 'It is very difficult to be a girl.'

'My dear, it strikes me it would be more difficult to be anything else when Nature had arranged the matter,' returned Violet, laughing outright.

'Oh, you know what I meant! I never can get my thoughts to express themselves correctly,' said Mary, drumming on Violet's knee with the fingers of her right hand.

'Now, what is one of the things, for in-

stance, that you find so difficult, mouse,' asked Violet.

'Oh, I don't know that I could put any of them straight, and if I did I suppose they would sound dreadfully silly,' said Mary; and now she beat Violet's knee with her little clenched fist.

'But we agreed long ago that we would say as many foolish things to each other as we pleased, just as a relief from having always to talk wisely and decorously before Eliza,' urged Violet.

'I'm sure she is very good and kind, but oh, how awfully stilted and impossible!' cried Mary.

'She was everything to me when I sorely needed a friend,' said Violet. 'I am attached even to her peculiarities. I would not change her any more than one would change an old-fashioned grandmother. Bless me! it is lucky she does not hear my comparison!'

'I am sure she never even thinks in words of less than ten syllables.'

'Dreams in hexameters, I am certain,' said Violet. 'But now about your nonsensical thoughts, puss, and the difficulties you find in being a girl—though I don't know how we are to remedy that misfortune.'

'Don't make me laugh, else I'll not tell you. But I don't believe I can, even if I try.'

'Just pour out the fancies pell-mell; perhaps I can find the heads and tails—oh! shade of Eliza, forgive me!—caput and caudal extremities,' said Violet; and then felt vexed with her own weakness for keeping aloof from the truth, of which she wanted to be convinced beyond the possibility of doubt. The hour of conviction had arrived—something told her this—a conviction which must aid her to carry out unflinchingly the stern resolves which she knew were the only sensible ones in her case—must make an additional reason, in fact, for her to put by, cast out, trample down, the foolish dreams of the past week, since their indulgence would not only render her own future doubly desolate when reality came, as come it must, but would blight the heart and happiness of this girl, who had youth and early womanhood in her reach—all the dearly-prized gifts which Violet had lost — lost, too, without ever having had the opportunity to enjoy in their fulness.

'Come, now!' she persisted. 'About this hardship of being a girl! Well, girls are

"cribbed, cabined, and confined"—there is no doubt of that.'

'Just it,' said Mary, in that slow, introspective, thinking-aloud tone. 'Why everything is improper, even to wonder about—yet it seems so natural. How is one to help it, though one is a girl? Now men are not troubled in that way! They may be fond of—I mean they may like a person, and tell themselves so at the first glance—and we only call that manly—but girls!'

'Yes, girls?' returned Violet, in an insinuatingly inquiring voice, as Mary paused.

'You know I don't mean me,' Mary hastened to add, explicit if not elegant. 'I don't know what set me thinking about it all—some book I've been reading, perhaps.'

'I dare say—some book—well?'

'And a girl mustn't think about liking a man, no matter how much attention he may have shown her, until he tells her outright that—that he loves her. Oh, now I know what set me off in such a silly way!' cried Mary, in a tone of relief. 'It was Eliza Bronson. She said, *à propos* to some novel, that no young lady with a well-regulated mind would permit herself to think of a man until she was betrothed to him; and as for loving

him, well, that she seemed to consider would be indelicate until they were safely married —she did, upon my word!'

'I have no doubt of it,' replied Violet; 'but you and I may have our private opinions, and express them to each other, even if we refrain from shocking the good Eliza by promulgating the same. I am sure that phrase is fine enough to content even her!'

Still with the same effort to keep the conversation upon that footing of half-jest—but now not from any shrinking to hear the truth which she must arrive at—only to prevent Mary's suspecting the force of her own disclosures, and so suddenly shutting her heart over her secret, like a sensitive plant closing at the breath of a breeze which stirs its leaves too roughly.

'I don't think it is fair!' ejaculated Mary, still pursuing the train of her reflections. 'And yet a girl does feel ashamed if she finds herself thinking that a man likes her, though he may have shown it so plainly she could not help knowing.'

'I see no reason whatever for shame,' rejoined Violet, as her cousin's speech faltered, and found no conclusion. 'Not the slightest! No shame, either, in admitting frankly to her

own soul that she likes him in return! Come, you see how bold I am; you need not be afraid of shocking me by any such thoughts —I should say theories,' she added, and Mary's quick response proved that her substitution of the latter word had been a comfort.

'Yes, theories—that expresses it! I suppose one ought not to read so many novels—Miss Bronson says so!'

'Of course! But though she keeps "Sismondi," or some other tiresomely wise book, open on her table, I have discovered that she generally has a romance hidden in the drawer. Our pattern Eliza is as artful in her way as the rest of us! Mouse, don't be troubled—read your novels, and indulge in your thoughts——'

'Theories,' amended Mary.

'Exactly—theories! Where were we in our discussion? As usual, when women try to theorise, we grow so discursive that we lose the thread of our sermon every other minute!'

'I haven't lost it,' said Mary, eagerly, quite at ease now, and finding great relief in putting forth her thoughts, since Violet had found such a convenient, generalising term under which to class them. 'I think the sort

of girl who fancies, every time any man pays her a compliment—and men are so absurd about that—it vexes me—do they suppose we are all idiots?'

'Most human beings are, mouse; but in your energy you let your sentence evaporate in a parenthesis!'

'Yes—pays her a compliment—I know where I was! Well, plenty of girls think the man must be in love. Now that is downright silly. I've no patience with such nonsense!'

'Nor I! But we are talking of sensible girls—girls so certain of their own desire to do and *be* right, that they are not afraid to probe their hearts away down to the bottom. Now when such a girl has reason to believe a man loves her, she is neither indelicate nor foolish in considering the matter and asking herself point-blank if it is true that she——'

'Likes him,' put in Mary, hastening away from the dangerous word Violet had ruthlessly employed.

'But the type of girl we are talking of wouldn't reach that point unless the man had given her good reason.'

'Just so! And if he stops there—doesn't

say outright what his looks and—— Oh, you know what I want to say!'

'Of course I do! I am always meaning to write a novel which shall turn on that very position. I am always meaning to do so many things that I never accomplish!'

'Oh, and you could write such a beautiful one. I never heard anybody talk like you. I am sure you're a genius, Violet.'

'I have not the slightest doubt of the fact, mouse! Well, I am making a chapter of my novel now. Let me see if your theories can't help me thoroughly to understand my heroine. She always gets so complex that she puzzles me hopelessly, else I should long ago have presented her to the world in three volumes.'

'Very well! Put it that she has reason to believe the man likes her—so much reason that she knows she has a right to believe so, though she does reproach herself for thinking it, because he has never said it out in so many words.'

'Never revealed his passion, you mean; don't be so prosaic when you are helping to compose a novel, mouse! Surely there is no shame to her for thinking—for knowing!'

'Oh, but if she began to think that after all she had made a mistake; if he did not speak—if——'

'I won't contemplate that possibility for my heroine,' interrupted Violet. 'In her case, the hero is a true, honest, earnest man; he would be incapable of the meanness of trifling. He might wait — circumstances might force him. Dear me, if she were very young, he might doubt if she could know her own heart yet! Why, he might half try to fancy an older woman for a little——' She was going too far; she stopped; added quickly: 'No, not that for our hero, though even heroes have their weaknesses, else they would not be men. But the sort of man we are describing——'

'Imagining,' suggested Mary, softly. 'What does he do, Violet?'

'He waits—to be certain, both for himself and her; then some day he comes to our little heroine and tells the whole story,' said Violet, and her voice was like the echo of sweet music.

'To be certain of himself! Then he might go!' cried Mary, indignantly. 'I would never listen if he had to wait to be sure; I mean our heroine shan't, in the novel!

Why, she would despise him and be ashamed of herself.'

'Well, well! There might be other reasons —plenty! He might not be sure of her feelings—afraid to startle her, not just in a position to marry at once.'

'Oh yes, that might be,' said Mary, with a sudden inflection of contentment in her voice. 'It would account for any little odd changes in his manner that had seemed like caprice sometimes!'

'And he could not be capricious, of course! No, no; the fitting moment arrives at last, when everything is made clear, and the dream becomes a blessed reality.'

'Reality,' echoed Mary, then became silent for a time.

And Violet knew the truth; there remained no possibility for her foolish heart to cheat her reason by declaring those intuitions which days and days before had warned her, to be mere suspicious fancies—the coinage of her own restless brain. She had been determined to reach such absolute confirmation that her weakness could no longer plead the lack of proof—she had gained it now!

Somehow the very sound of content in the girl's tones, revealing the comfort she had

derived from her cousin's words, which showed her that her sensation of maidenly shame was uncalled for, roused Violet to a positive frenzy of bitterness.

Why should she sacrifice herself to this child—this baby? Why should she not snatch the happiness within her reach, enjoy it to the full? At least when it faded she could die!

Yet all the while, as she looked covertly down into the sweet, pure face which, unconscious of her scrutiny, had turned towards the window, and was gazing out at the white, resplendent moon, it seemed to Violet that she was watching, not Mary, but the phantom of her own youth, pleading mutely with her for its happiness.

And Mary, rousing herself from her dreams, looked up, still letting her head, with its long veil of moonlight-tinted hair, rest upon her cousin's knee.

'I am sure you are tired, and I have been keeping you awake to listen to my absurd fancies — theories, I mean,' said Mary. 'Why how pale you are—you are not ill?'

'Only cold,' shivered Violet; 'so cold—away down into my very soul!'

Mary brought a shawl, folded it care-

fully about her, and kissed her forehead with an affectionate freedom.

Violet submitted to the caress, frightened by her own wicked thoughts; ashamed too, which was worse.

'Kiss me again!' she said suddenly.

'Why, you are shivering yet!' cried Mary. 'You are tired out! Come and lie down on my bed. I shall be worried if you shut yourself up in your room.'

They lay down and both slept till the moon hung low on the horizon, half hidden, so that she was a mere blade of light; then they woke at the same instant, and Violet's first thought, as she felt the soft pressure of her cousin's arms, was one of gratitude that her wicked thoughts had fled.

'What were you dreaming?' Mary whispered.

'The end of our romance,' Violet replied, 'and the heroine was very happy at the last. Go you to sleep, childie!'

And both slept again.

CHAPTER XII.

AGAINST FATE.

The next day came—her day for remaining at home and receiving a host of tiresome visits, Violet remembered, and felt inclined to shut her doors against the whole world, to shut her windows against the sun, and sit down in a gloom in keeping with the darkness which had fallen upon her soul.

But this feeling was worse than folly, as contemptible as that which caused her to shrink this morning from Mary's kiss when she entered before departing to her work. She would not sit there idle, making present and future more unsupportable by listening to the misanthropic complaints of her heart, since it must be admitted it was her heart that ached—ached so bitterly. She had no time to waste in regrets and repinings—youth might afford to do that

when trouble came; but at her age it was necessary to be up and doing, trying to make amends for neglected opportunities, misspent hours, before the night came in which no man can work. But what was she to do by way of being useful? She could give money—she had always done that liberally since she had the power. Tend the sick, visit the poor—common sense told her that a paid nurse could perform the first duty much better, and observation had shown her that the poor decidedly object to such inspection from the rich, and gird under advice as sorely as their finer neighbours.

Read, study, paint, practise her music? All very well; but those pursuits could no more fill up life than indulging in a spinster's legitimate outlets for affection—dogs and cockatoos—could bring contentment. All her attempts at usefulness, at occupation, would be just as many make-believes: therefore why essay to deceive herself into hoping she could find peace through these means? She was a poor, weak, silly thing: her romance, her maudlin poetry, as much out of keeping with the mental state befitting her years as the physical appearance of youth which even this morning looked at her from

the glass, untouched by sleeplessness and trouble as if it were quite independent of the mind it held in its keeping. Ah, there was Miss Bronson knocking at the door—Miss Bronson, commonplace as a type of existence itself. So much the better: the companionship might be of service in controlling her ridiculous mood, and she would keep to it. Go out with Eliza, shop a little, visit the charity-school a little, talk gossip and religion a little, cheapen a parrot, discuss the merits of foulards and friends in the same breath—go decorously through the decorous round of employments natural and fitting to old maids like herself and Eliza.

She carried her mocking resolve into effect, then came back to a *tête-à-tête* breakfast with her friend, for Mary took that meal with the Vaughtons in order to save time, and Eliza waxed jubilant over their delightful morning—they had done so much! it was so pleasant to be together!—and her listener reflected that she might accept this morning as a type of her future. Oh, the years!—the years!

Finding herself moaning anew, Violet devised a new punishment—she sat down at the pianoforte and practised German duets with Miss Bronson; and of all created sounds,

those were what she loathed the most! Altogether, when the hour arrived for visitors to begin their intrusion, Violet could feel that she had inflicted about as severe a season of pin-and-needle torture upon her troublesome heart and imagination as could have been devised or even their weakness merited.

People came and went in constant succession, drank chocolate, talked nothings, grinned and grimaced, and Violet decided that she grinned and grimaced and uttered platitudes as well as anybody. She joined in the excitement over the news that Cica, the new ballerina, was expected, disputing vehemently whether the sylph could really stand poised forty seconds on the great toe of her left foot or only thirty-five; went into the depths of despair because, after all, the municipality would give no subvention to the Pergola. Oh, she had proved herself as accomplished a butterfly with the soul of a grub as any of her neighbours, and could be content.

Then into the midst of the chocolate drinking, and the scandalmongering, and the flirtations, and the vapidity, floated Nina Magnoletti, and in her wake came Laurence Aylmer, and the touch of his hand and the glance of

his eyes sent a thrill through Violet which shook her out of her elaborately studied inanity, and caused her such bitter wrath that for an instant she was almost ready to visit it on him by chilling words or covert slights.

Was she mad? Did she want to publish her secret, her shame, not only for his reading but for the delectation of her fellow-grubs with butterfly wings? Who was he? Why, the hero that had saved her life—her friend Laurence, to be received as he always had been, frankly, cordially! He might amuse himself with insects, but he was neither butterfly nor grub—he was a man, with aspirations, resolutions, a career; certain of a man's weaknesses clinging to him, no doubt—he would be superhuman else—but at least among the best specimens of his kind; and she was glad to see him, very glad—her friend Laurence!

He, like everybody else, remarked upon her high spirits and marvelled at her heightened beauty. The women decided that Miss Cameron had taken to rouge at last, and both men and women decided in addition that the whispers in the air must be true: she had chosen a lover—Carlo Magnoletti, of course — and her sisterly cordiality with

Aylmer and her affectionate demonstrations to Nina were correct religious tributes to the goddess of appearances, so well paid that nothing was left to be desired. A woman who sacrificed so strictly at the great deity's shrine might have twenty lovers among her lady friends' husbands behind the altar if she saw fit ; as long as she behaved as she did now, her fellow-worshippers need see only the clouds of perfume rising from the censer which she swung so gracefully before their eyes.

Nina and Aylmer appeared late, and gradually the other visitors departed, and they were left alone with Miss Cameron. Then the professor was announced, and the three exclaimed in wonder, for receptions were his aversion.

'I concluded your menagerie would have dispersed by this time,' he said ; 'and I knew I should be busy to-morrow.'

'You might have come the day after,' said Aylmer, with laughing impertinence.

'There's a simpleton in this room,' cried the professor, frowning affectionately at him. 'It is not old Schmidt, and all simpletons are males——'

'Don't trouble yourself to repeat such well-known facts in natural history,' broke in

Violet. 'How nice of you to give me the surprise of a visit to-day! I have not seen you for an age. What have you been doing?'

'I'll tell you what I'm going to do,' returned the professor; 'leave your and the marchesa's perfections and Laurence Aylmer's sins behind me for a week or ten days.'

'What a shame!' pronounced Violet. 'And where and why are you rushing off in this barbarous fashion?'

'As for the where, to Venice and Trieste,' replied he; 'as for the why, a company wants to buy some land I own in Austria. These are matters which must be regulated personally between me and their president. I won't journey all the way to Vienna, and, as he is ailing, I can't make my old friend come here; so we compromise on Trieste. I wish you were going.'

'I wish you owned no land, and I wish, since you do, it was so worthless nobody would buy it,' cried Violet.

'There's friendship for you!' laughed the professor—the very word sounded cold as ice to Violet. 'Laurence, I shan't ask you to go with me.'

'I shouldn't if you did,' said Aylmer; and he was indulging in a private reflection as it

chanced, roused by that word the professor had employed. There might easily be such a thing as carrying a good resolution too far. Friendship! His forbearance was exhausted; he could continue this pretence no longer! Before the professor's return he would tell his story—try as Violet might, she should not avoid the hearing; and she must care a little—she could not banish him without a hope! Oh, how beautiful she looked to-day! somewhat tired now, perhaps, but, if possible, all the more lovely; only so calm, so composed—that irked him.

And Nina was upbraiding the professor.

'At least you might have begged me to run away with you. I have always wanted to: ask Carlo. You have no eyes or ears except for Violet, and I hate her!'

'You are so close in my heart that I see and hear you whenever it beats. Don't say I can't talk poetry!' cried the professor.

'Nina,' said Violet, 'can't you and Carlo dine with me to-morrow night?'

'I can,' Nina answered; 'I may as well admit now that I had already made up my mind to do so. Carlo is going off to some horrid dinner where only his own species is invited.'

'Are you one of the unfortunates, Mr. Aylmer?' Violet inquired.

'No; it is some half-political affair.'

'Then, as I intend to make the professor dine here, whether he will or not, please come too. I will ask, let me see—whom shall I ask? We shall be four ladies—ah, Gilbert Warner. Nina, I can't have any of your Italian adorers. Now it is agreed, so let nobody forget. Here comes Miss Bronson! Eliza, prepare your pocket handkerchief—the professor is going away for a week.'

And then, to prove that it is natural for human beings to persecute defenceless animals, they began to tease the spinster, and the professor went on his knees and quoted verses, and the whole group talked a great deal of nonsense, as even sages must and will.

The trio departed; Violet dressed, and went out to dine, then to the last act of the opera, then to some festive gathering, where, out of compliment to Lent, even the relief of dancing was omitted; then home and to bed among the small hours, but not to sleep, tired as she was—over-tired, she told herself—nothing else ailed her. She was not fretting

—not moaning; she just felt cold and lethargic, and inexpressibly weary.

The next morning Mary received directions, when she went to the studio, to give Violet's invitation to Gilbert Warner, and make sure that he would come, previously engaged or not. So Mary had to send one of the workmen to ask Warner to come in to her atelier—half glad to have so good an excuse—half ashamed to request a visit on any grounds, for during these last days Warner's abrupt changes of manner (the more noticeable in a person of his even temperament) had troubled the girl exceedingly. He came at once, but just to show that her message had caused him no perturbation, he carried his palette on his thumb, and his mahl-stick in his hand, and Mary's evil genius prompted her to regard this as a method of hinting that she had disturbed his labours.

'I beg your pardon for interrupting you,' she said, enveloping herself in the quaint stiffness habitual with her when embarrassed. 'I begged Violet to write you a note, but she said she had not time. It is only she wants you to be sure and come and dine to-night—she will take no refusal—along with Mr. Aylmer and Madame Magnoletti, because

the professor is going away—I mean, of course he is to be there—and she wishes you all to meet him.'

Having hastily enunciated this not over-clear explanation, Mary began wetting her clay as eagerly as if it had been left dry for a week, and, as it was too wet already, an ill-advised pat she gave the bust sorely disturbed the symmetry of its Grecian nose. The effect was exceedingly ludicrous; she and Warner saw it at the same instant: he was deciding to refuse the invitation, and she wondering if he noticed how her hands trembled. Both were excited and nervous, and they suddenly burst out laughing, then looked at each other, half pouting, half appeased, like two children.

'Psyche with a cocked-up nose!' said Warner.

'It is your fault. I was just turning round to see what made you so long in answering,' retorted Mary.

'I think—I am afraid I have an engagement,' he said, recovering his gravity at once.

'Cousin Violet will never forgive you if you leave her with so many unsquired ladies at her dinner-table,' Mary urged.

'Oh, indeed,' said he, waxing cross again; 'I am sorry I can't make myself useful in filling up a gap.'

Mary, fearful her speech had sounded rude, forgot her irritation in penitence and regret.

'I am sure you know how cordially Violet likes you,' she said; 'please do not disappoint her!'

She looked at him and smiled, blushing a little; he could not resist that half-appealing glance; forgot his suspicions—forgot Laurence Aylmer for the moment.

'Will you say that you would remember to care if I did not come?' he asked, with a certain seriousness under his playful manner.

'I wish you would accept,' Mary said honestly, then relapsed into her stiffness. He had been so odd and changeable of late, that she was afraid of seeming undignified or forward if she betrayed too much solicitude over a matter which ought to be treated as a trifle.

'Then I will,' he said.

And now she smiled so cordially that the sunshine lighted his soul. They began to talk—of the bust, the weather, no matter what; any subject would serve, and, who knows? the conversation might have drifted

on and on, until Warner's heart would have overleaped bounds, and the clouds been dispersed so effectually that any later gathering into gloom would become impossible. But Fate would not permit this ; she sent a messenger in the person of old Miss Vaughton, who suddenly appeared on the threshold of her salon with a bunch of flowers in one hand and a head of lettuce in the other. Cook had just come home from market, and Miss Vaughton had brought the roses to leave as a friendly gift, and the lettuce to exhibit as a marvel of size considering the season.

Nor would she retire in search of some household occupation, as she usually did at this hour ; no indeed. She called her woman to take the lettuce, and began to arrange the flowers in a vase. Nor would she be taciturn and inoffensive, according to custom. She insisted on talking. Even her loquacity might have been endured without calling down Warner's secret maledictions on her venerable head, had she been content to remain deaf as ordinary, in which case, whether other people talked or not during her monologue, she would have been none the wiser ; but she heard in that diabolical fashion deaf people will now and then, and what she did

not catch she would have explained—she, always the mildest and most deprecatory creature in existence!

She stayed and she chattered until Warner, mentally declaring his belief that the devil had entered her, betook himself to his studio in despair, and fell a-dreaming instead of doing his work in a sensible fashion.

During the afternoon, while he was wondering what excuse he could devise for paying a second visit, in order to be certain that the sunshine still lasted, the professor came in to look at his picture, and, before he had finished criticising it, sent desolation to Warner's soul by exclaiming:

'I thought that dawdling Aylmer was just behind me! I told him not to interrupt Miss Danvers's work any longer.'

Five minutes passed; the professor criticised and praised; ten minutes passed; he was talking still, and Warner trying to listen and answer—but no Aylmer appeared. The sunshine was all gone; the young artist drifting down into a gloom black as night!

Presently the offender entered, but Mary accompanied him, and she looked smiling and happy—and oh, surely she was blushing; ay,

and that Aylmer fairly whispering in her ear to the very door!

'Since you were to be interrupted, Mr. Warner, I let myself be persuaded to come too,' said Mary, serene in the belief that the atmosphere of the morning still continued.

'I am fortunate that such was the case,' he replied, and the very sound of his voice warned Mary that they were back in the chill realm of discord. She felt vexed with him, ashamed of caring, ready to disbelieve Violet's hopeful theories, and quite forgot to examine the picture, in her interest in something Aylmer was telling her about Sweden, *à propos* to a sketch of Warner's.

The painter was inclined to refuse the invitation to dinner after all; but that would be rude now, so he dressed and went to the house at the appointed hour. The marchesa was already there, having come very early, but the two remaining guests had not arrived. The respite proved of no service to Warner, however. The other three ladies made him welcome, but Mary did not choose to appear forward, and sat almost silent, never once looking in his direction after she had returned his salutations.

At length the professor's voice sounded in

the anteroom, deep and agitated, like the notes of a bass drum.

'Potztausend! That pamphlet I put in my pocket for the Fräulein. I had it when I got out of the hack! Run, run, you blessed Antonio, and see if it is on the stairs! Laurence, you needn't wait, announce yourself while I get out of this confounded great-coat, the builder of which ought to be consigned to the rack—the rack!

The ladies' laughter from the salon replied. Laurence pushed back the curtains and entered, laughing also.

'Mr. Aylmer,' he announced. 'Miss Cameron, if I do your footman's duty I shall expect to be paid accordingly.'

Ah, Mary could brighten now—Warner saw that. She could receive and answer this new-comer's greetings with evident pleasure. Violet saw it too, and thought how rapidly this change had come about from the old shyness in the presence of—ah yes—her friend Laurence!

Then, the professor having freed himself from the great-coat, made his entrance, dropped his handkerchief before he reached the centre of the salon, and, in stooping to pick it up, turned his back to the group, and

was astounded by hearing a second burst of laughter, in which all the spectators joined. Neither ill-humour nor the demands of courtesy could have hindered any human creature from yielding to merriment. The professor was dressed in correct evening costume, even to the flower in his button-hole, but one of the swallow-tails of his coat was wanting—had been cut off close up to the body of the garment, presenting an effect indescribably ludicrous.

The professor raised himself, turned a wondering face on the group, and cried:

'Have you all been taking laughing-gas?'

They tried to check their mirth, but found it impossible; so Violet hurried forward, seized the savant by the shoulder, and stationed him so that he could see his own image in a mirror.

'What have you been doing?' she demanded.

The sage was betrayed into one brief expression of surprise, then he stood and stared at his own reflection, stoical as an old Roman.

'After all,' said he, slowly, 'it is an improvement. A coat with swallow-tails is a ridiculous thing—when you cut off half the

caudal extremity it can only be half so ridiculous.'

As the laughter gradually died away, he condescended to explain. He had been busy with some chemical experiment, and wanting a piece of cloth at a critical moment, ran into his bedroom, scissors in hand, to cut a bit off an old coat he had left hanging on the bedpost. The woman, in arranging the chamber, had hung his festive costume over the ancient garment, and in the gloom, the professor ruthlessly snipped off the left tail and went back to his task, becoming so absorbed therein that it grew late before he recollected his engagement. He dressed in a great hurry, his mind still occupied with his work, and put himself into the coat without noticing its disfigurement.

'I shall not go home unless you send me, Fräulein,' he declared, perfectly unabashed, as he finished his explanation. 'I would try the resources of Antonio's wardrobe, but he is smaller than I, and I suppose my *paletot* would be as objectionable as my present plight? Come, decide; will you have a mutilated swallow, or shall he fly off and hide his shame and misery in his desolate nest?'

'If you forgive our lack of generosity in laughing, we can easily forgive your lack of caudal appendage,' said she.

By this time Warner had remembered his sense of injury, and Eliza Bronson to be a little shocked at such an accident, but the general hilarity soon seized them again. Of course they all sat down at table in a most nonsensical mood, and Violet did her best to keep the conversation at that pitch as long as she could—the more trivial the subject the better, in her frame of mind.

It was a gay evening, but, with the exception of Nina and the professor, the gaiety required an effort. Eliza Bronson felt twinges in her neck which warned her that she had taken cold, and should probably have an attack of neuralgia, and the others were troubled by twinges sharper than her physical reminders.

Aylmer found Miss Cameron's friendliness too composed and frank to be satisfactory. She could have no feeling whatever for him. If his love had touched her heart, she would find it impossible to preserve that sisterly calm without a break. It was a new dread, and all the more stinging on that account.

As for Violet, she had placed Aylmer between Nina and Mary, and a dozen times during dinner perceived fresh evidence of the intimacy which had grown up between her cousin and Laurence, and the open pleasure which the young girl showed in his conversation. Gilbert Warner saw these signs as plainly as Miss Cameron, and reviled his own folly in having come to be tortured in this fashion. He chafed and fretted till he felt as if consumed by fever, and condemned all dinners as hollow mockeries, and their present feast the most hollow of all.

Late in the evening, while Eliza Bronson gratified the professor with selections of Wagner's music, Mary and Warner seized the opportunity to bring new clouds between themselves by a little disagreement about an article of Laurence Aylmer's in a late review: Warner, with elaborate candour, admiring the style, but condemning the sentiments with polished ferocity ; and Mary, taking the opposite side, partly from irritation, partly because she hated injustice, and Warner was unjust. Laurence sat at a distance talking with Violet and Nina, and Violet received her warning—proof that her careful, persis-

tent efforts to restrain their intercourse to the safe grounds of friendship had done its work!

Nina was telling a story of a marriage which had lately taken place between two of her acquaintances. The engagement had been a long one—the man away in Japan for several years. Time and absence, perhaps, undermined his affection: at all events, he fell in love with the daughter of one of the foreign consuls at Yokohama. He behaved well according to his lights: sailed for Europe, the preparations for the wedding were made, and it was only at the last moment, through the stupidity or malice of a connection lately returned from Japan, that the lady learned the truth. She taxed her lover with his unfaithfulness, and he told her the whole tale, announcing his readiness to fulfil his promise—and she married him.

'One would like to have her walled-up alive!' cried impetuous Nina, as she ended her narrative.

'I blame the man as much as I do her,' said Violet, firmly.

'And you, Mr. Aylmer? Now for a masculine view!' added Nina.

'I cannot blame him,' he answered slowly,

rather hesitatingly, in reality wondering a little over Miss Cameron's remark. 'Under such circumstances an honourable man must feel himself guilty—base! No—he could not speak—he must fulfil his vow—keep silence utterly!'

'I cannot imagine a greater wrong,' said Violet. 'To a true woman there could be no cruelty like that. His duty was to tell her the plain facts, to ask for his freedom. Do human beings love or unlove at pleasure? He was not to blame for the weakness of his heart, but he was to blame for sacrificing his own future, bringing a sharper unhappiness on her than the truth, bad as it might have been, could have brought if told in time.'

'Well, I never expected to hear Miss Cameron uphold infidelity, eh, Mr. Aylmer?' Nina exclaimed.

'No,' he said constrainedly.

'I do not,' Violet replied. 'But people make mistakes—even good, honourable, yes, resolute people. Such blunders are not always a proof of weakness either.'

'It is certain,' said Aylmer, 'that even people who know their own minds as a rule do err in affairs of the heart. It is so difficult often to decide what is love, what fancy. But

if a man mistakes a caprice for a real sentiment, he ought to abide by the consequences.'

'The woman must be blind indeed who could not perceive it, mad or cruel if she did not free him willingly,' said Violet.

'That would be easy enough if she had only taken him on probation,' observed Nina, laughing. 'Men's vanity will not let them believe it, but half the time we women are drawn into engagements just because an adorer is importunate—one pities him, tries to believe that sympathy is affection—and so yields.'

'Very true,' rejoined Violet. 'And often, often she would gladly find an excuse to draw back! How thankful she must be if his heart does speak and show him, that what he thought love was only a fancy! All he has to do is to be honest. Why, he could have no surer, more devoted friend in the world than that woman!'

'I think he would pass a good many uncomfortable hours,' said Aylmer. 'I suppose if she showed him that she saw the truth and was content, his part would be easy enough, that is, in the case you mention, marchesa, where she had only been trying to learn to care for him.'

'Yes, perhaps,' Nina replied.

'He would be put out of all difficulty at once,' said Violet. 'She would not, if a true woman, leave him an hour in doubt after she knew the facts. She would speak, or so plainly show him that she saw—be his tacit assistance in the quarter where he really loved—that he could either tell his story or be certain that he might look upon matters as already settled.'

'There may be truth in the often-repeated assertion that men are fickle,' said Aylmer; 'that special weakness being such a sore spot for a man to contemplate in his own nature, is perhaps a proof.'

'No man need be ashamed of making a mistake,' said Violet; 'he need only be ashamed of the weakness of not acknowledging it.'

'Very harsh doctrines, if modern women had hearts like the heroines in old-fashioned novels,' laughed Nina.

'A right doctrine,' said Violet.

Just then Warner came up to take his leave, and the conversation ended. In a few moments the guests were gone, and Violet went at once to her room.

She understood everything now. Aylmer

had recognised the difference between fancy and love—he had feared to appear weak or false in her eyes, and so had sought to guard his heart against Mary's smiles.

'It is all clear,' Violet said to her image as she rose and stood before the glass, after a long meditation. 'Are those tears? Come, I did not know you had been crying! I'll not scold you—a little nonsense might be admissible as long as there was a doubt. But you know the truth now, you see your way, and you mean to walk steadily therein. Fears he may look weak! No, no—we knew it was only a fancy, knew it from the first! I told you so—wanted it so—you are quite at rest, quite satisfied—and he is my friend Laurence!'

And when the dawn appeared she, woke from a mocking vision in which he stood beside her, told her that she erred—he loved her!

'I will cry!' she moaned; 'I have a right—not for him, not for my silly dream! But Fate was cruel to send me dreams so late, and it is against Fate, not my heart, that I battle!'

CHAPTER XIII.

'SHE SAID GOOD-BYE.'

Two days went by, which, busy as she kept herself, gave Violet ample leisure for reflection. She comprehended that neither anger nor self-contempt would help her case. She must admit as a truth that the experience, without which she had always said no woman's life could be complete, while believing it would never come to her, had set its ineffaceable seal upon the present and future.

And almost as soon as she had learned that it was Love who stood beside her, she had been forced to see that the garland in his hand was withered already. Well, faded flowers were appropriate, typical of her age! Ah! she was trying again to be mocking and severe—why should she? Surely she might show a little tenderness to her heart—yield a little to the pity she felt for herself.

Renunciation — sacrifice — those were the lessons she must learn now ; bitterness and wrath would only render the task more difficult.

How interminable these last eight-and-forty hours appeared as she looked back over them ; how this present day dragged ; how tired she was ; how ashamed of the petty irritability which beset her—the desire to turn away from Mary's morning welcome with stinging words, to be sharp and abrupt with anybody who approached ! It seemed, too, as if every human being near deliberately chose that time to be as annoying as possible : to do whatever ought to be left undone and say everything that ought to be left unsaid, from worthy Miss Bronson down to Clarice.

'My dear,' said Eliza, 'how pretty Mary grows. Really she begins to look very like you when you were young—I mean, when you were her age.'

'Which comes to the same thing,' returned Violet.

'I don't know if you have noticed—but I have—oh, I have been certain of it for some time,' pursued Eliza. 'However limited the range of my mental faculties may be, at least

I possess the ability of observation—of seeing things clearly. You will own that I can say so much without betraying undue vanity.'

'No doubt,' said Violet, and longed to add that she had a wonderful faculty for seeing everything wrong, and felt more ashamed than ever at this impulse to turn upon a creature so defenceless.

'She likes him,' sighed Eliza, 'but has only lately discovered the state of her heart. You may not have observed—but I can enlighten you now, for I am sure he likes her—perfectly sure! So suitable in every way, is it not? I am so pleased; you will be too, I know, when you think it over. You are surprised—admit it! Oh, I have kept their little secret.'

'Has one been confided to you?' Violet asked.

'No, no, not a word; it was not necessary. Why, I saw from the first how it would be. I hinted it to you in the beginning. Oh, you must recollect—now don't you recollect?'

'I dare say you did.'

'Just reflect; you must remember.'

'Oh, perfectly,' said Violet, desperately

plunging into the falsehood to get rid of further importunity.

'Ah, I thought you would. Yes, yes! What does Moore say?' Eliza maundered on, '"There's nothing half so sweet in life——" How does it run, Violet?'

'I am eighteen years too old to remember,' said Violet.

'"Nothing half so sweet——" Is it sweet, or bright?—as—as—"Nothing half so——" Dear me, how very odd that I can't recall it.'

'I think I shall go out,' said Violet.

'I'll go with you if you don't mind. "There's nothing——" how vexatious! "A peri stood at the garden gate——" Oh, mercy, no!'

'Please, Eliza,' broke in Violet, 'do go to the library and hunt up Moore if you are in the mood for his sugary inanities.'

Enter Clarice.

'Oh, mademoiselle, I am desolated. I beg mademoiselle's pardon, I so seldom forget, and the letter mademoiselle gave me yesterday quite went out of my mind.'

Business letters, of great importance too. And on Clarice's heels appeared Antonio.

'I am very sorry to tell mademoiselle——'

Then a long story about the necessity of discharging a gardener.

'"There's nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream!"' sang Eliza triumphantly, putting her head in at the door just after Violet had got rid of the other importunates. 'Pretty, is it not?'

Fate is never satisfied without thrusting an under-current of broad farce into our tragedies. Any human being who has suffered knows this—knows, too, how it grates and jars, denuding suffering even of the dignity which might give a certain support.

Violet ordered the carriage in desperation, but go with her Miss Bronson would, and chattered like a magpie all the time. They were passing the Palazzo Rimini when she uttered a sudden exclamation:

'I am surprised that he visits her—I really am! But he just went in; did you see him, Violet? Mr. Aylmer——'

'Certainly has a right to visit where he pleases,' interrupted Violet, and fell to wondering if, after all, Laurence were less frank and honest than she had thought him. But this fancy was only in keeping with her other pettiness. She was in a mood to suspect

any and everybody—to be harsh and unjust. Oh, how contemptible to let trouble affect her in this fashion!

They drove to the Cascine, Eliza recurring to the compliments on her own perspicacity, and relating the growth of her discovery with 'damnable iteration,' till Violet felt she must spring out of the carriage to escape the sound of her voice.

'I have never said a word until this morning. I did not mention Mr. Aylmer's name, you may be sure—but oh, if you had seen how she coloured up, and ran away——'

'Home, Gregorio!' called Violet to the coachman, unable to bear these gnat-stings any longer.

'It is early yet. I think I will stop at Mrs. Eaton's,' said Eliza; 'I have not been there for so long.'

'I would, by all means,' cried Violet, almost enthusiastically. 'Stop at the Hôtel de Russie, Gregorio.'

'On the whole, I think I will wait till to-morrow,' said Eliza. 'Aren't you a little pale, my dear? Have you got a headache? Oh, my love, here comes Colonel Falkland! Now you can ask him about taking that package to England for his sister. Gregorio,

stop at the corner. Ah, Violet, at least I remember things at the right moment. I'll tell you about Mary when we get home —here comes the colonel—she did look so pretty in her blushes. Oh dear! have I lost my handkerchief?'

The worthy spinster had selected this morning of all others to torment poor Mary as much as she had been worrying Violet during the last hour. To increase the sting of her words, Mary thought she was alluding to Gilbert Warner, and departed for the studio with a fresh arrow in her heart. Not only had she deceived herself in regard to his feelings, but she had kept her own secret so poorly that even Eliza Bronson suspected its existence.

Mary's solitude in her studio was as hard to bear as the inflictions Violet had undergone; and just as she had reached a pitch of desperation Gilbert Warner's evil genius prompted him to present himself. He came, after swearing over and over to his soul that he would stop away—came in a miserable, resentful, injured mood, when he was ready to say everything he ought not, and misconstrue every remark of hers, and found Mary in a humour to return his errors in kind.

A lately-printed lecture of Ruskin's that lay on the table formed a capital subject of difference. No two people ever did discuss Mr. Ruskin without quarrelling. In less than five minutes the demigod produced his usual effect, enabling them to display the deliciously obstinate determination of widening 'the rift within the lute,' which is a characteristic of humanity—to be blind and deaf to the truth just at the moment when such conduct might entail consequences fatal to their whole future. Had they quarrelled outright, there would have been a hope of some good result—but they did not. They bickered, and were sarcastic and indifferent; and though any looker-on — even a mole —could have seen the real state of affairs, and set them right in a flash, they went on as recklessly as two perverse, fascinated children playing with fire; but in their case, pain and jealousy made it a grave contest, in which neither would stop, though conscious of getting severely burned, until satisfied of having at least scorched the other.

When they had exhausted Mr. Ruskin's capacities for creating difficulties, they dragged in Victor Hugo by his grey hair, and after that employed the sacred memo-

ries of Raphael and Michel Angelo as shuttlecocks, and by the time they had finished were exasperated enough to utter certain personalities very thinly disguised in the garments of polite words.

Puerile—silly? No doubt; but three-quarters of the misery we suffer comes about from as slight causes, and the pertinacity with which we all at untoward moments trifle with our happiness or fling it away—see white black, and misunderstand those who love us—is a sight to make angels cease weeping, and decide that a race so vacuous must be as incapable of real joy or grief as it is of using its boasted reason.

'We seem fated to disagree to-day,' said Warner.

'At least I trust that I have been neither cross nor uncivil,' Mary said, with a slight emphasis on the personal pronoun.

'And that means I have?' returned he, in an inquiring tone.

'Pray do not dignify my words by assigning them occult meanings,' said Mary, conscious that the speech sounded worthy of Miss Bronson, and rendered more angry by the thought that her stateliness held a touch of absurdity.

'I only adopted the signification which was obvious even to my dulness,' Warner replied, waxing a little Grandisonian.

Perhaps now, had they been left alone, one or the other might have pronounced words so sharp that penitence would have brought about a better understanding, but an interruption came at this moment—deferred, one would almost be ready to say, by some malicious imp, until it could do harm instead of good.

Some person in Mr. Vaughton's studio knocked on the door—it proved to be the sculptor's head workman, bringing a note.

'Is there an answer?' Mary asked.

The messenger was waiting to know.

'Will you excuse me, Mr. Warner?'

Warner bowed. As Mary tore off the envelope it fluttered to his feet; glancing involuntarily down at it, he recognised Laurence Aylmer's writing. He looked back at Mary. She was reading eagerly—oh, her colour changed! he was sure of that—her very fingers trembled! She had been changing colour rapidly and trembling for some moments before, but he had not noticed it.

As she looked up their eyes met; he

thought she seemed amazed at his scrutiny, afraid, perhaps, that she might have betrayed her pleasure in perusing the page.

'Yes—and my best thanks—tell the man to say,' was Mary's observation to the workman, who bowed and departed.

Warner stooped for the envelope, and handed it to her.

She accepted it with a gesture of thanks, and put the note back therein. At another time she would very likely have shown him the missive—a cheerful little billet, enclosing an address of some mutual friend, which she had asked him for on the previous evening.

'I am glad to see something pleasant has happened to you,' said Warner, determined that she should have no doubt as to whether he had perceived her agitated manner while reading the page. 'One never can fail to recognise that peculiar writing—pray don't think I picked up the envelope for the purpose of looking at it.'

'I do think you are rude!' cried Mary, indignantly. 'You have no right to suppose me mean enough to harbour such a suspicion.'

'I beg your pardon again. Really I am so unfortunate in my remarks that I think I had better bid you good-day.'

'Good-day,' echoed Mary.

'I will leave you with Mr. Aylmer's letter' —affecting to laugh—'that will be agreeable, like its writer.'

'Mr. Aylmer is always good-natured,' said Mary.

'Oh, a *preux chevalier.*'

'Good, honest, noble. I thought he was your friend.'

'He is; and he is all that you say,' replied Warner; then, with another pretended laugh, he added: 'The woman who marries him will be fortunate, however great her own deserts, and'—still laughing,—'I fancy I know who that woman is.'

Mary had turned towards the pedestal which supported her clay. She looked back, and momentarily forgot anger in a desire to warn him not to open his lips to anybody else, supposing that he referred to her cousin Violet.

'Please don't say it; oh, he has never—I mean——'

Her eagerness resembled embarrassment. He grew fairly sick and blind. He had been answered indeed.

'I beg a thousand pardons,' he interrupted, caught his breath, and gasped: 'Don't fear my speaking!'

Oh, he must get away, the room reeled! He snatched at his watch, stammered something, heard Mary ask the hour.

'Four o'clock,' he said: 'I—I had forgotten an engagement on business. Good-morning, Miss Danvers.'

'Good-bye,' replied Mary, not by any means appeased, and hastily resumed her work.

He hurried across the room, paused and gazed at her for an instant, then went out and closed the door.

He reached his studio, flung himself into a chair, but not a moment's space for recovery from his agitation was given. The servant entered with a letter. He opened it, hardly knowing what he was about: took in the meaning enough to understand that it contained a proposal to go to Greece. An immediate answer was requisite.

'She said good-bye,' he muttered: 'it shall be good-bye! I have learned the truth at last; there is nothing to keep me here any longer.'

END OF VOL. II.

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